



Monarchies and the Great War

**Matthew Glencross and
Judith Rowbotham (eds.)**
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

The Trial of the Kaiser

William A. Schabas
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

Review by: Jonathan Triffitt



Monarchies and the Great War. Edited by Matthew Glencross and Judith Rowbotham. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. ISBN 978-3-319-89514-7. xiii + 332 pp. £71.50.

The Trial of the Kaiser. By William A. Schabas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-883385-7. x + 410 pp. £24.99.

The First World War posed the greatest challenge to Europe's monarchies since the guillotine loomed over Paris's *Place de la Révolution*. By 1919, France and the continent's two other pre-war republics, Portugal and Switzerland, had been joined by lands once home to the most glittering crowns, and nations born of the collapse of mighty dynastic empires. A century on, however, the monarchs' culpability in their own demise remains disputed and their post-revolutionary fates practically forgotten.

In *Monarchies and the Great War*, the latest volume in the “Palgrave Studies in Modern Monarchy” series, Matthew Glencross and Judith Rowbotham have assembled nine chapters that seek to determine how monarchy “performed ... [and] was *perceived* to perform” amidst total war (3). By specifically examining royal responses to conflict within individual national and dynastic contexts, the collection intends to show that early-twentieth century monarchies were neither homogenous nor anachronistic. Far from being “ready casualties of conflict” simply by definition, they were shaped by a panoply of “wider (and sometimes long-standing) factors” most readily perceived through comparative and transnational investigation (37, 31).

Bookended by chapters on British royal diplomacy before and after the war—focusing on relations with the United States in the 19th century (Erik Goldstein) and Japan in the 20th (Antony Best)—the national case studies proffer three broad arguments. Firstly, that monarchs have been unjustly written out of the historical record. Despite supposed death rattles transcribed during the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 or the accession of Emperor Karl of Austria in 1916, for example, the Ottoman (Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık) and Habsburg (Christopher Brennan) dynasties remained potent forces. Assuming new roles, Sultan Mehmed V (as *pater patriae*, Caliph, and the westernised equal of his European brother monarchs) and Emperor Karl (as would-be peacemaker and general breath-of-fresh-air) formed vital and independent cogs in their respective war efforts. As Jonathan Boff deftly demonstrates, however, defects in royal cogs could cause the entire machine to seize up; the German army's hopelessly and fatally dysfunctional command structure was a consequence of Kaiser Wilhelm's failure to stop the rot.

Karl's efforts were hampered by his almost complete lack of experience or training, drawbacks not shared by George V and Queen Mary. As Glencross argues, George's background in the Royal Navy—and his concomitant inculcation into the martial ethos of “God, King, and Country”—fundamentally informed his pragmatic and personable style of war leadership. For Queen Mary, discussed by Rowbotham, memories of home-front deficiencies during the Boer War were instrumental. Leading by example, she oversaw the enormous and unprecedented war-time mobilisation of British women, helping to “modernise and so strengthen” the monarchy in the process (192).

Considered thirdly is the disconnect between war-time performance and popular memory. Illustrative here are the examples of Victor Emmanuel III of Italy (Valentina Villa) and Albert I of Belgium (William Philpott). Physically unable to fight, Victor Emmanuel's three years on the front line nonetheless immortalised him as Italy's “soldier king.” Albert, meanwhile, was lonely, melancholic, and, in Allied eyes, “an obstructive nuisance” (273). His tenacity and determination to prevent Belgium's liquidation, however, made him a “figurehead of righteousness” internationally and a beloved symbol of national resistance at home (261).

Despite its welcome consideration of extra-European institutions, *Monarchies and the Great War* suffers from a confusing selection of chapters that, in some cases, diverge notably from the editors' already extensive paradigm. A full four deal with Britain, but no room is found beyond the introduction for Tsarist Russia. This is a shame. The editors' commendable determination to challenge the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* view that defeat in war necessarily spells doom for monarchies could have been well explored in an exposition on the Romanovs. Nevertheless, the examples given here soundly demonstrate that monarchy was neither ossified, uniform, nor predestined to fail by 1914. To varying degrees, monarchs and their families continued to act as commanders-in-chief, ambassadors-at-large, and embodiments of national identity, adapting to changing circumstances (or appearing to) when necessary. Greater evaluation of the nexus between performance and dynastic fate would have been appreciated, but, in all, this is a very welcome and thought-provoking contribution to an oft-neglected field.

Perhaps the most infamous victim of the war, and a solid example of a monarch engineering his own demise, was Kaiser Wilhelm II. More has been written on Wilhelm than the other nineteen German monarchs who abdicated alongside him combined, but his post-revolutionary existence rarely receives more than fleeting attention. To note that William A. Schabas' enticingly entitled monograph, *Trial of the Kaiser*, continues this trend is far from a criticism. It is not primarily a study of monarchy, or even of Wilhelm II, but

an elegant investigation into the dawn of international law as seen through the aperture of (ultimately) futile Allied attempts to prosecute him after hostilities ceased.

The study consists of eighteen short chapters, arranged chronologically from war-time investigations into German atrocities to the “natural death” of the Allies’ endeavours in 1920 (290). This period encompassed four principal stages: first, the Kaiser’s flight from Germany and preliminary Allied discussions; second, the Peace Conference’s “Commission on Responsibilities”; third, the intervention of the “Big Four” heads of government; and fourth, the Allies’ collective inability to implement their demands. As an epilogue, Schabas indulges in a little hypothetical history, imagining how Wilhelm’s trial might have unfolded.

The process marked “the first international debates about perplexing issues of international law that retain their salience,” but weaving these discussions into a net in which to snare the Kaiser was clearly an undertaking fraught with disagreement and convolution (4–5). Schabas’ account is full of such dichotomies. Splits formed under the Allied banner (between belligerent British and French diplomats and reluctant Americans) and even within individual delegations (Woodrow Wilson was far more inclined to act than his advisors). The bulk of research, meanwhile, was undertaken by legal experts, but the final decision left to highly-amateurish politicians who threw about ill-defined terms and frequently seemed to improvise in light of public opinion. Nevertheless, as Schabas stresses, the Allies were forging a new path with little precedent to guide their steps and a series of complex questions blocking their route. Do heads of state enjoy immunity? Is a head of state responsible for every act committed by their subordinates? Is waging a war of aggression a crime? If not, can it be declared one and applied retroactively? Add to the mix embryonic plans to establish the first international tribunal and it is hardly surprising that negotiations were less than harmonious and their conclusions vague and impotent.

Trial of the Kaiser is accessibly written, though the reader is occasionally obliged to drag themselves against a current of “sub-commissions” and “tribunals” in the middle chapters. The flow is also disrupted by Schabas’ use of extended verbatim extracts (reaching seven pages at one point in chapter twelve) from negotiations between the “Big Four.” Typographical and stylistic errors are noticeable, particularly in German words lifted from contemporary English-language accounts, and some noble titles are configured either incorrectly or misleadingly. But these are mere distractions from the wider picture; Schabas has produced a meticulously researched and highly readable account of one of European monarchy’s more curious and forgotten wartime affairs.

Schabas' work is a legal history and insisting on greater coverage of this episode's specifically royal aspects within its confines would not be fair. Further insight into the German perspective, nevertheless, would be welcome. Wilhelm II did not suffer his fate alone. He was merely one of twenty German monarchs who abdicated in November 1918 and were—alongside hundreds of military officers—placed on extradition lists by the Allies in February 1920. What became of these demands? How were they perceived or countered in Germany? The answers would surely reveal a great deal about German identity at a time of massive transition and the fate of monarchism in the heartland of Europe's lost dynastic network.

JONATHAN TRIFFITT
University of St Andrews