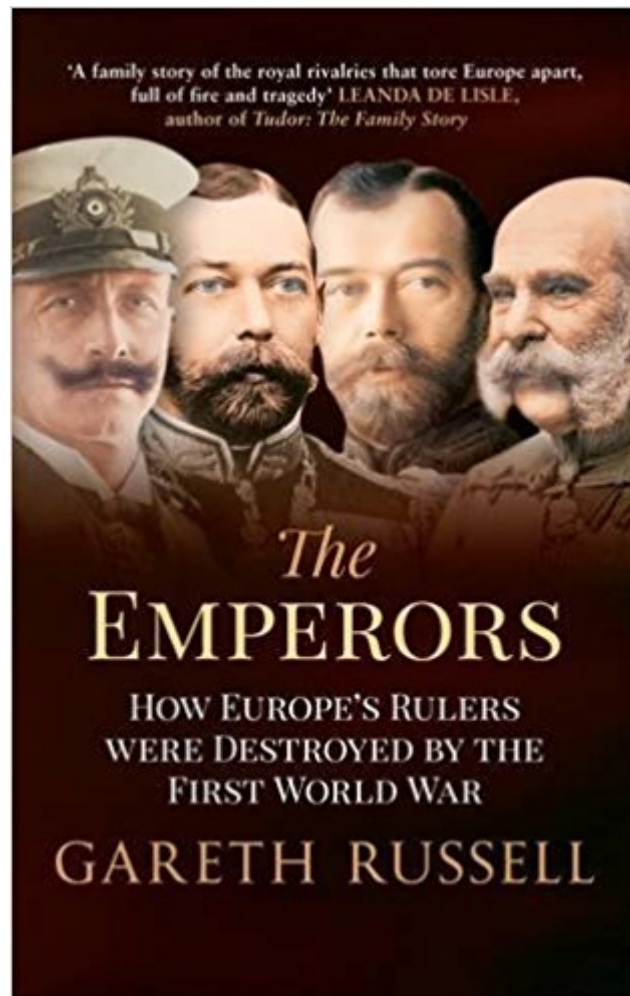




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# The Emperors: How Europe's Rulers Were Destroyed By The First World War



## Synopsis

On 28 June 1914, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated on a visit to Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist called Gavrilo Princip. The assassination set in motion the events that led to the outbreak of the First World War, one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history and a trauma that would bring down the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ending nearly eight centuries of Hapsburg rule and unleashing unrest across the European continent. By the end of that conflict, not only had the Austro-Hungarian Empire crumbled, but the other two imperial rulers of Europe, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, had lost their grip on power. The three great monarchies of Europe had fallen. Only in Britain would the ruler of an empire, King George V, the first cousin of both the Kaiser and the Tsar, successfully retain his crown. In *The Emperors*, Gareth Russell tells the story of the Austrian, German and Russian imperial families during the four years of the First World War and the political and personal struggles that brought about their ruin.

## Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Amberley Publishing; Reprint edition (September 15, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1445650509

ISBN-13: 978-1445650500

Product Dimensions: 4.9 x 0.9 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 27 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #464,578 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #177 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Military > World War I](#) #707 in [Books > History > Military > World War I](#) #1480 in [Books > History > Europe > Germany](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Mr. Russell has produced a highly readable work, good as a refresher about all you forgot or did not listen to at school." (The Pittsburgh Post Gazette)

Gareth Russell studied History at Saint Peter's College, Oxford, and his masters at Queen's University, Belfast. He is the author of the [Confessions of a Ci-Devant](#) historical blog, with over three hundred followers. His modern novels and his historical research have both been profiled in The Sunday Times, Tatler, The Irish News and The Huffington Post. He has also

appeared on BBC TV and radio.

One hundred years ago the guns were roaring across Europe. Within six months of the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914 hundreds of thousands of men had been wounded or killed and large areas of territory had been devastated, and the largest battles and deadliest new weapons were still to come. At the heads of four of the major combatant nations were the Emperors: King George V of Great Britain (who was also Emperor of India), German Emperor Wilhelm II, Austrian Emperor Franz Josef, and Russian Tsar Nicholas II. By the time the guns finally fell silent only George V still held his throne. Gareth Russell's relatively short (227 pages plus Notes and Bibliography) history is a sound comparison of the five Emperors (when Franz Josef died in November 1916 he was succeeded by his great-nephew Emperor Karl I), contrasting their personalities, the influence or lack thereof they had on their nations' war efforts, and their families and ultimate fates. It is an interesting and lively read, though heavily reliant on secondary sources with little or no archival research, as well as some puzzling bibliographical omissions. Russell's focus is on the war years, so the childhoods and early reigns of the Emperors are dealt with very briefly in the first chapter. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914 and how it led to the outbreak of war is then covered before the main narrative begins. We learn some interesting new variations on some long accepted beliefs, including that the Tsar was an independent and decisive ruler until he succumbed to depression in 1916; that the Kaiser had very influence on strategy or other decisions during the war, often giving surprisingly good advice to his generals which was ignored; and most importantly that the collapse of the Russian, German, and Austrian monarchies were not predestined under some great historical dialectic. I enjoyed many of the details Russell includes about the families of the Emperors, such as that Wilhelm had a Down's Syndrome granddaughter who was not institutionalized as so many were, but was fully included in the life of her family; or the many charming stories about the Tsar's hemophiliac son and four beautiful, tragic daughters. Perhaps the most interesting chapters are those that deal with the young Emperor Karl I and Empress Zita, who made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to pull Austria-Hungary out of the war in 1917. I found Russell's Bibliography interesting, though some omissions puzzle me: why would he rely so extensively on Gordon Brook-Shepherd's biography of Empress Zita but not, apparently, on the same author's excellent biography of her husband Karl? I also found George V's inclusion in the cover photo of the Emperors somewhat odd since he is rarely referred to in the book itself (none of the King's many biographies are included in the Bibliography.) In sum I feel that this is an interesting introduction to the stories of the Imperial rulers of World War I Europe that should

inspire its readers to seek to learn more about them.

I purchased this book with the thought that it would give me some idea of how the emperor system led to the political downfall of three of the empires during and after World War I. There is not much new information in this book. One gets to understand why three of the emperors fell from power after what they did during the war. The Russian Empire was a strong prosperous country, but Nicholas let his wife and a religious man cause the royal family to lose respect. Then he abdicated and left the country in the hands of people who lost power quickly. The German Empire never created limits to the military industrial complex, and became dominated by a military clique that took away much of William II's power. When this military clique lost the war, they created a stab in the back theory that exonerated them from the fiasco that led to the war. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire has too many minorities and was ripped apart by ethnic nationalism. This book is an OK read about the loss of the three empires following the First World War.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I do have to agree with some other reviews - there is not a lot of new information here. With that said, however, this is the first book that I have read that focused on how WWI brought down 4 empires that were ruled by monarchies - Austria (Hapsburg), Germany (Hohenzollern), Russia (Romanov) and Ottoman (very little is mentioned of this empire in this book and I would have liked to have read more on this). The book gives a brief biography of each of the rulers, along with their wives. The book follows the course of WWI (battles are mentioned, but the book does not go into a lot of detail of the battles, which for the purpose of this book I agree that not a lot needs to be said on these), the critical decisions/errors made by these rulers and the eventual downfall of their empires. I really believe that if events would have been handled differently, WWI could have been avoided, which would have most likely (hard to say though) resulted in these monarchies remaining in place which would have most likely (but again hard to say, this is just speculation) prevented the rise of Hitler and Stalin. Again, this is just speculation and some other event could have resulted in the rise Hitler and Stalin. Highly recommend this book. 4 star rating was given because as stated, I wish more attention would have been given to the Ottoman empire also.

There is no new information in this book, but the author offers a knowledgeable, well-written, fresh interpretation of the Royal leaders of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary during the First World War. Although Mr. Russell agrees that his subjects failed as leaders, most importantly in going to

war, he is sympathetic and sees a good deal to admire in some of them. His favorites are the least well-known Karl and Zita, who ascended the throne after the death of Franz Josef. They hated the war and tried unsuccessfully to get Austria-Hungary out of it. The other royals were less admirable, but did abhor the violence and suffering. The portraits drawn of the royal leaders are balanced and helped by the author's eye for the telling quotation and anecdote. The book ends with a highly speculative epilogue where the allies are castigated for not letting the defeated royals continue to rule. The result, Mr. Russell believes, was the rise of the Nazis and the horror of the Second World War. At best this thesis is unprovable and ignores the turmoil following the war with the Monarchs being blamed for war and defeat that made their continued rule impossible. Notwithstanding the weak last chapter, this is a fine piece of historical writing..

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