



George, Nicholas and Wilhelm: Three Royal Cousins and the Road to World War I

By *Miranda Carter*

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In the years before the First World War, the great European powers were ruled by three first cousins: King George V of Britain, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Together, they presided over the last years of dynastic Europe and the outbreak of the most destructive war the world had ever seen, a war that set twentieth-century Europe on course to be the most violent continent in the history of the world.

Through brilliant and often darkly comic portraits of these men and their lives, their foibles and obsessions, *Miranda Carter* delivers the tragicomic story of Europe's early twentieth-century aristocracy, a solipsistic world preposterously out of kilter with its times.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review The slippery slope into horrific armed conflict is a tale often told about World War I, but this author's take on the antecedents of the European war of 1914–18 is distinct. Carter views the shifting alliance entanglements of the Great Powers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and especially the growing animosity and rivalry between Britain and Germany, with particular focus on the attitudes and actions of three royal first cousins: Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, Emperor Nicholas II of Russia, and King George V of Great Britain (who also reigned as emperor of India, hence the book's title reference to three emperors). Rich in concrete detail, elegant in style, and wise, fresh, and knowledgeable in interpretation, the author's account observes a profound anachronism at play: that these three monarchs, in what they didn't realize were the waning days of the institution of monarchy, handled foreign diplomacy as if it were a family business. Despite the reality of growing fissures separating their countries, "each emperor continued to paper over the cracks with cousinly gestures, each increasingly irrelevant." Europe plunged over the precipice of war in August 1914, revealing in stark terms the inability of royal familial ties to control and contain national disagreements; as the author has it, the fact that Wilhelm, Nicholas, and George were out of touch with actual politics could not have been more apparent. An irresistible narrative for history buffs. --Brad Hooper

Review

"History on a large canvas. . . . Carter writes incisively about the overlapping events that led to the Great War and changed the world. . . . Impressive. . . . Carter has clearly not bitten off more than she can chew for she—as John Updike once wrote of Gunter Grass—'chews it enthusiastically before our eyes.'"

—*The New York Times*

"Splendid. . . . This is history on a vast scale written on an intimate level, and it is immensely rewarding. . . . [Carter's] portraits of the men are razor-sharp. She places each monarch in his unique context, providing a tapestry of the age and the maneuvering that led to the outbreak of war. . . . The reader is swept up in the pageantry, pathos and glory of an era that makes our own seem remorselessly venial and vulgar."

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Engrossing and important. . . . While keeping her focus on the three cousins and their extended families, [Carter] skillfully interweaves and summarizes all important elements of how the war came about. . . . An original book, highly recommended."

—*The Dallas Morning News*

"A fascinating biographical saga. . . . The personal, hidden history of King George V, Tsar Nicholas II and Kaiser Wilhelm II's relationship [is] incomparable, haunting and unforgettable."

—*Providence Journal*

"The parallel, interrelated lives of Kaiser Wilhelm II, George V, and Nicholas II are . . . a prism through which to tell the march to the first World War, the creation of the modern industrial world and the follies of hereditary courts and the eccentricities of their royal trans-European cousinhood. . . . An entertaining and accessible study of power and personality."

—Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Financial Times*

“Some wars are inevitable. Others, such as World War I, could have been avoided. . . . R....

Review

Fascinating. A wonderfully fresh and beautifully choreographed work of history -- Craig Brown Mail on Sunday Carter draws masterful portraits of her subjects and tells the complicated story of Europe's failing international relations well...a highly readable and well-documented account Spectator Absorbing. Carter has a good eye for a quote and an ability to bring various personalities to life. A convincing and considerable achievement -- Sarah Bradford Literary Review Carter's account of how an already dysfunctional family turned toxic is fresh and enjoyable...timely and welcome Guardian Miranda Carter's story is full of vivid quotations...a romp though the palaces of Europe in their last decades before Armageddon Sunday Times Well-paced, a thoroughly polished, professional piece of work. A macabre family saga -- A. N. Wilson Evening Standard An entertaining study of power and personality portrays the strutting absurdity and grotesque glamour of the last emperors on the eve of catastrophe -- Simon Sebag Montefiore Financial Times Fascinating. Carter is a gifted storyteller and has written a very readable account Independent Carter's intelligent, entertainging and informative book folds dynastic and political narratives into a panoramic account of Europe's road to war London Review of Books In her group biography of three monarchs, Carter has succeeded in painting their personalities in vivid colours...she brings an excellent biographer's eye for the telling detail...the great appeal of this book lies in it narration and comparative analysis of the life and personality of her imperial subjects...well-researched and expertly written...an engaging and remarkably even-handed portrayal The Times Literary Supplement That these three absurd men could ever have held the fate of Europe in their hands is a fact as hilarious as it is terrifying. I haven't enjoyed a historical biography this much since Lytton Strachey's Victoria -- Zadie Smith Miranda Carter writes with lusty humour, has a fresh clarifying intelligence, and a sharp eye for telling details. This is traditional narrative history with a 21st-century zing. A real corker of a book History Today A highly original way of looking at the years that led up to 1914 -- Antonia Fraser Sunday Telegraph Books of the Year Carter deftly interpolates history with psychobiography to provide a damning indictment of monarchy in all its forms -- Will Self New Statesmen Books of the Year A depiction of bloated power and outsize personalities in which Carter picks apart the strutting absurdity of the last emperors on the eve of catastrophe Financial Times Books of the Year Takes what should have been a daunting subject and through sheer wit and narrative elan turns it into engaging drama. Carter has a notable gift for characterisation -- Jonathan Coe Guardian Books of the Year

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