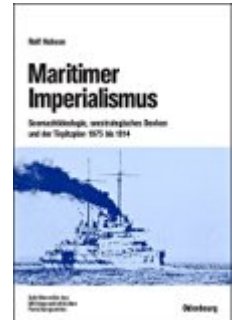


Rolf Hobson. *Maritimer Imperialismus: Seemachtideologie, seestrategisches Denken und der Tirpitzplan 1876 bis 1914.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2003. 338 S. EUR 34.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-486-56671-0.



Reviewed by Dirk Bönker

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More than thirty years ago, Volker R. Berghahn published his magisterial history of German navalism before the First World War. Contributing to the “critical” narratives of the Second German Empire and the Sonderweg in general, Berghahn exceptionalized German navalist policy while documenting for the first time the consistent pursuit of a long-term naval program and the anti-English and antiparliamentarian rationales attached to it. Berghahn, Volker R., *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie*, Düsseldorf 1971. In Berghahn’s view, the “Tirpitz-Plan” represented a social imperialist strategy of domination pursued by pre-industrial elites that sought to revolutionize the international order to preserve the existing politico-social order. His truly groundbreaking work set the tone for all subsequent studies of pre-war Wilhelmian navalism. While often criticized for its emphasis on the domestic roots of Tirpitz’ naval policy, Berghahn’s account has stood as the most authoritative book on German navalism for three decades; indeed, it is rather striking that the changing interpretations of the Second German Empire have until recently not

entailed a full reconsideration of Wilhelmian naval policy and politics.

In his ambitious study on German maritime strategy, entitled “*Maritimer Imperialismus: Seemachtideologie, seestrategisches Denken und der Tirpitzplan 1875-1914*”, the Norwegian historian Rolf Hobson offers a new and highly revisionist look at German navalism before 1914. Engaging in an effort that has been long overdue, Hobson has set himself the task to challenge Berghahn’s exceptionalizing interpretation of German navalism and reconfigure our understanding of the origins and goals of Germany’s maritime imperialism. Based on a dissertation thesis defended in 1999 at the University of Trondheim in Norway, Hobson’s study was originally published in the U.S. with Brill in 2002. Hobson, Rolf, *Imperialism at Sea. Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan 1875-1914*, Boston 2002. It is a reflection of the great scholarly merit of this outstanding work that the Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt in Potsdam decided to issue a translation in its own book series.

Chiding previous scholarship for the “völliges Fehlen einer vergleichenden Analyse” (p. 5) Hobson presents an analysis of the genesis of German navalist discourse and policy within the context of mutual processes of convergence and differentiation among national schools of naval thought. In so doing, Hobson elucidates the strong parallels between, and linkages connecting, the development and outlook between U.S. and German navalist approaches. Overall, Hobson situates the development of the thinking on naval strategy and maritime security in Germany and elsewhere within a changing trans- and international world of naval warfare, geopolitics, and maritime law as it was shaped by industrialization and ever-increasing economic specialization; the legal regulation of the war at sea as embodied in the Declaration of Paris from 1856; and the changes in the maritime balance of power and the relative position of the British navy therein. At the end of the book, Hobson also offers a series of comparisons concerning the politics of naval arming. Here he stresses the similarities between the experiences of the three autocratic empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany.

Reconstructing the evolution of German maritime strategy between the 1870s and 1900s, Hobson’s central argument is that a crucial shift took place during the 1890s. What he calls the “Prussian school” of naval thought gave way to the “German school.” The first approach, as best articulated by v. Caprivi, who served as the head of the German Admiralty and as Imperial Chancellor, cast Germany’s naval needs in terms of national defense in a war in Europe that would pit Germany against France and Russia. The main purpose of the fleet was to prevent a maritime blockade of Germany’s coast during a long war whose successful pursuit depended on continuing sea-borne imports of foodstuffs and raw materials. In Hobson’s account, the awareness of Germany’s economic dependence on sea-borne trade coincided with the recognition that the workings of maritime law and the interests of neutral powers such

as Great Britain imposed sharp limits on any Franco-Russian pursuit of an unrestrained maritime war of trade and commerce. Within these parameters German naval thinkers forged a system of naval strategy that reworked central tenets of battle-oriented land warfare and linked, in a systematic fashion, operational doctrines, arms programs, and naval tactics.

But by 1897-1898, this framework, argues Hobson, was superseded by a different approach, the “German school.” Led by Alfred von Tirpitz, its adherents defined Germany’s national defense needs in terms of global geopolitics, expanding “maritime interests,” and the political uses of military sea power. It was within this approach that the German battle fleet build-up took place after 1898 and focused on the use of military force against Great Britain within a deterrence framework. Rather elegantly, Hobson documents how this shift took place during the mid-1890s under the direct impact of the writings of the U.S. naval writer Alfred Thayer Mahan. An officer such as Tirpitz enthusiastically embraced Mahan’s thinking about sea power and imperial expansion while paying less attention to his views on military matters in a narrow sense.

Expanding on Joseph Schumpeter’s definition of imperialism and Alfred Vagt’s views on militarism, Hobson presents this shift in naval thought as a change from a rational naval strategy that addressed itself, in a realistic fashion, to Germany’s “objective” security needs to an irrational, imperialist, and militarist ideology of sea power. Schumpeter, Joseph, *Zur Soziologie der Imperialismen*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 46 (1919), S. 1-39 und S. 275-310; Vagts, Alfred, *A History of Militarism. Romance and Realities of a Profession*, New York 1937. This ideology, which Hobson equates with navalism, offered only a vague rationale for a maritime arms build-up that lacked clear objectives and linked only in the most general terms the cause for a large navy to Germany’s development into a

global trading state. Moreover, the embrace of this ideology compromised German military strategy. The thinking about a war with Britain after 1900 was fundamentally flawed. Rather than relying on the protections offered by maritime law and the shared interest of neutral powers vis-à-vis a superior maritime power, the Germans assumed that a numerically weaker battle fleet could force its opponent into battle and prevent a successful blockade of German coast on its own. According to Hobson, such hopes contradicted insights into naval warfare and the meanings of “command of the sea” that Tirpitz and others had reached in the early 1890s. Invoking critics of Tirpitz’ military strategy, such as Admirals von Galster and Wegener, and the military historian Herbert Rosinski, Hobson is quite adamant in his critique of the military reasoning behind the Tirpitz plan after 1900. Galster, Karl, *Welche Seekriegsrüstung braucht Deutschland?*, Berlin 1907; Ders., *England, Deutsche Flotte und Weltkrieg*, Kiel 1925; Wegener, Wolfgang, *Die Seestrategie des Weltkrieges*, Berlin 1929; Rosinski, Herbert, *The Development of Naval Thought*, ed. B. Mitchell Simpson III, Newport 1977.

German navalism is thus presented as irrational imperialism; yet according to Hobson it was not exceptional. As an ideology of sea power, German navalism was structurally similar to Mahanian navalism. As a geopolitical strategy it was not singularly aggressive; the emerging German fleet was not meant to be, and objectively did not pose, a direct military threat to English national security as defined by naval supremacy in European waters. By the same token, Hobson vigorously denies the existence of a large social imperialist design driving German navalism; the embrace of the new sea power ideology primarily reflected the institutional interests and professional desires of its fashioners who used arguments about domestic political promises rarely and then only as a selling device of secondary importance, as Tirpitz did on two occasions in the winter of 1895-96. If there was anything “special” about German naval-

ism then it was the circumstance that the authoritarian state structure allowed Tirpitz to stay in office for a long period and mastermind continuous naval expansion according to a long-term program.

This summary of the main argument hardly does justice to Hobson’s rich and learned analysis. Not engaging in unfair historiographical polemics, he displays a remarkable command of the vast scholarship on German naval history; he is also fluent in the literature on naval developments in other countries and Western maritime geopolitics and war-making in general. His productive dialogue with Avner Offer’s work on economic specialization and British naval strategy before and during World War I stands out in this context. Offer, Avner, *The First World War. An Agrarian Interpretation*, Oxford 1989.

Of course, Hobson’s examination is not without its shortcomings. The navy’s maritime imperialism never comes into full view. Its pathological nature (by what standards?) is asserted but hardly proven. The navalist sea power ideology and its geopolitical imagination are not systematically explored. The question of their intellectual roots and their plausibility for their fashioners is not raised. To say that the navy was interested in expansion without clear objectives overlooks the fact that Tirpitz and other navalists had well-defined ideas about German global empire and its privileged areas of interests. It is less than helpful to suggest that the same people were also misguided because they failed to recognize that in an Anglo-German war Germany could count on the solidarity and selfish interests of non-belligerent powers to counter any British pursuit of an all-out maritime war of trade, commerce, and economic strangulation. Likewise, Hobson’s insistence on the sharp break between the coalescing military strategy of the “Prussian school,” as enshrined in the famous Service Memorandum IX and war-planning against France and Russia, and the military rationale of the “risk fleet” against England is

overblown, to say the least; and it is hard to reconcile with the perspectives of the historical subjects themselves, that is, of strategists like Tirpitz and Admiral von Moltzahn who clearly thought otherwise. Overall, Hobson's underlying analytic of setting a sound military strategy of national defense (the Prussian school) against an irrational sea power ideology or navalism (the German school) expands on the artificial dichotomy between true professionalism and militarism, which, pace Alfred Vagts and Samuel Huntington, masks their mutual imbrication. Vagts, Alfred; Huntington, Samuel P. , *The Soldier and the State. The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations*, New York 1957.

But such criticism should not deflect attention from the obvious. Rolf Hobson has published an important book on German navalism that successfully challenges notions of German navalist otherness and draws attention to the interrelationship between economic specialization, military geopolitics, and maritime law. It is a most salutary step towards the writing of post-exceptionalist histories of Germany's navalism (and its military in general) that draw on and combine transnational and cross-national comparative perspectives.

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