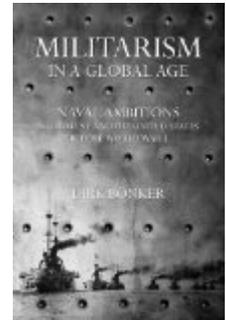


Dirk Bönker. *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States Before World War I.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. x + 421 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5040-2.



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Dirk Bönker's *Militarism in a Global Age* builds on his previous work on American and German navalism in the early twentieth century, and embodies many of the elements of best practice in both transnational and comparative history of recent years.[1] It also, commendably, provides a readable and thought-provoking introduction to the subject for the inexpert, while adding considerably to a number of the historiographical debates he wishes to further.

For Bönker navalism can be defined as a form of modern militarism advocated by naval elites who argued that sea power was a key historical determinant and viewed their respective industrial nations as potentially self-reliant world powers. Within this broad arena, Bönker's work seeks to move away from previous understandings of militarism within the bounds of national uniqueness. He instead sets out to challenge both the insular American and German narratives of exceptionalism, asking specialists and novices alike to reexamine the shared history of professional militarism in the pre-First World War era and ques-

tion the oft-positing division between Western democracy and "authoritarian German militarism" (p. 8). By doing so, he places his work at the heart of recent efforts to "globalize" modern U.S. and German scholarship, and demonstrates crucial transatlantic exchanges and parallels in military thinking.

Simultaneously Bönker seeks to advance historiographical strands rooted in distinct American and German debates. On the German side he attempts to build on the insights of Rolf Hobson, and the wider shift away from *Sonderweg*-based interpretations. His major point of contention with Hobson's analysis is the latter's treatment of German navalism as an "irrational imperial ideology of sea power" rather than a "truly professional strategy of national security" (p. 10).[2] While acknowledging the remarkable richness of the scholarship on the militarization of the United States, Bönker disputes the view forwarded by Michael Sherry, amongst others, that true militarization did not occur until the 1930s and 40s.[3] Indeed, he questions the "common sense among

historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era” that the U.S. experienced nothing approaching the militarization which overcame Europe in the decades before the First World War, instead arguing that the United States saw extensive professional militarization and growing administrative autonomy (pp. 12-13).

The book is divided into four major sections: “Naval Strategies of World Power”; “Approaches to Maritime Warfare”; “The Navy, Governance, and the Nation”; and “Naval Professionalism and the Making of Navalism.” Part 1 examines U.S. and German strategies of world power, which Bönker persuasively argues played a crucial role in state-building in both countries. Chapter 1 examines various discourses on national destiny and empire, based on German navalist aspirations for equality within a pluralistic “concert” of powers, and a two-part American vision of an expanded Monroe Doctrine in the short term, and ultimate world supremacy. Chapter 2 explores the similar ways in which officers prepared and lobbied for policies to protect their nation in the coming “big power conflicts” that both elites fore-saw (p. 71). Chapter 3 in many ways epitomizes the distinction between Bönker’s work and that of Hobson within the German historiography. This is as Bönker’s analysis emphasizes balances of military force, and continual rational—if often errant—evaluations of comparative power within a competitive arms buildup. It also draws some of the sharpest contrasts in the book as it directly discusses the very divergent experiences of the Great War, which saw the German naval elite face “imminent geopolitical failure” while the American navy experienced only expansion (pp. 96-97).

Part 2 argues that German and U.S. strategists thought of the use of military force in shared terms, dominated by the concept of short, sharp, decisive battle fleet engagements. Chapter 4 argues that the concept of battle fleet warfare solidified in the 1890s and resulted in subsequent strategic inflexibility. This included the shared be-

lief in the need to consistently expand networks of supporting infrastructure, such as coaling stations, the laying underwater cable, and establishing other forms of communication in imagined (and overlapping) spheres of influence. Chapter 5 examines the cult of decisive battle, which came to dominate the thoughts of military planners in both navies, and contends that operational planning for future wars, including against each other, rested on the same calculated assumptions of short, regionally limited, big-power wars. Somewhat counterintuitively, chapter 6 contends that visions of naval warfare were shaped by economic considerations, and envisaged limited conflicts of economic pressure and resultant social and political turmoil, as a result of targeting civilian trade. It also examines the transformation that occurred in such thinking during World War One when both sides were confronted with the devastating “extermination”-ist logic of both the British blockade of Germany, and the German response of unrestricted submarine warfare (p. 169).

Part 3 is the most intriguing for this reviewer, as it focuses on issues of national governance and the development of state apparatus. In chapter 7 Bönker argues that both naval elites attempted to cast themselves in the role of natural leaders of a wartime state, and that American navalists in their determination to established their independence from civilian governance consciously attempted to model institutional structures in a German image. In “Manufacturing Consent,” chapter 8, the author convincingly contends that German and American navalists alike turned the “terrain of naval policymaking” to their own advantage through official lobbying, pressure-group politics and public relations work (p. 200). Chapter 9 emphasizes the intensely nationalist nature of the two navalist projects, in which Bönker has found such deep transnational insights. It is striking that while both naval elites discussed the reorganizing of the nation, national efficiency, and the need to neutralize internal enemies, they did so in highly divergent terms. American officers tied their

project to the call for bureaucratic expert government (which, I would argue, was in a recognizable British mold) but within what Bönker terms the “constitutional shell of republican governance” (p. 225). Meanwhile, German navalists emphasized the more autocratic elements of their own government while forwarding the case for limited social reform to stave off socialism. This is undoubtedly the most cultured and persuasive portion of Bönker’s examination of the navalist worldview.

The final section focuses on naval professionalism and the self-image of German and American navalists as expert servants of the industrial nation state. Chapter 10 claims that in the German case this meant the embrace of the “science of sea power” as a professional ideology that in many ways mirrored the “strategy science” approach commonly identified with the German army (p. 256). Many German naval attachés took great pride in the fact that Americans “took the ‘example of our navy’ as a model” while themselves shunning any insight to be gained by transatlantic comparison (pp. 273-74). Lastly, chapter 11 offers a timely reminder that while at first glance the navalist project in either country would appear to be monolithic, in both cases it was in fact “riddled, in varying ways, by conflict over turf and policy priorities” (p. 19). Perhaps the best demonstration of this complex reality of multiple power centers in either country is the discussion of the struggles between the General Board and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels throughout 1914-15.

Militarism in a Global Age successfully integrates two national historiographical narratives and explores the underlying history, employing a remarkable range of transnational and comparative approaches to great effect. That said, it is regrettable that, perhaps inevitably, the British portion of Bönker’s early work was not fully integrated into this monograph. This may well be the complaint only of the British-born, but often one

feels that while the insight offered is telling and the transatlantic link identified is proven beyond doubt, the unseen arm of the Royal Navy—influencing both their American and German would-be challengers—is too often insufficiently fleshed out. In a perfect world, one would hope to see such linkages more thoroughly explored; in reality, two countries may already prove an expansive enough canvas for even such an accomplished scholar to cover. When discussing Alfred Thayer Mahan and his racial thought, for example, a brief treatment of his award of the first-ever Chesney Gold Medal in 1900, the most prestigious prize bestowed by the Royal United Services Institute (R.U.S.I.), would seem appropriate.^[4] Similarly valuable would be a greater recognition of the very real binding effect of the intense racial Anglo-Saxonist sentiment emanating from members of the military elite in both the United States and Great Britain, which the author has already identified (p. 44). That such extensive linkages and responses, of both the American and German elites, to British models, interests, and actors are so downplayed is disappointing. This is especially true as Bönker’s own evidence consistently refers to many German officers’ fears (from Tirpitz down) of an Anglo-Saxon “racial cartel” (p. 63); and includes multiple calls for Anglo-Saxon unity from noted American navalists (p. 71).

This minor quibble aside, I wholeheartedly recommend *Militarism in a Global Age* to all those interested in militarism in the early twentieth century, German and American military history, intellectual history, and above all the study of transnational exchanges during the Progressive Era. The author’s firm grasp of the principles, advantages, and potential pitfalls of transnational and comparative history—in addition to his command of his own more narrowly defined subject area—is truly impressive. Bönker both convincingly argues that comparative and transnational approaches need not be opposed, and conclusively demonstrates that when these perspectives are applied to appropriate historical subjects and

themes they can weave together many narratives to produce highly novel, engaging and valuable results.

Notes

[1]. See D. Bönker, “A German Way of War? Narratives of German Militarism and Maritime Warfare in World War I,” in *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*, ed. Sven Oliver Muller and Cornelius Torp (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); and D. Bönker, “Admiration, Enmity, and Cooperation: U.S. Navalism and the British and German Empires before the Great War,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001).

[2]. Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002).

[3]. Michael Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[4]. See for example “Alfred Thayer Mahan to George, Duke of Cambridge, 10 July 1900,” in *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Vol. 2 1890-1901*, ed. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 1975), 691. See also Mahan’s *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Sons, 1897).

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