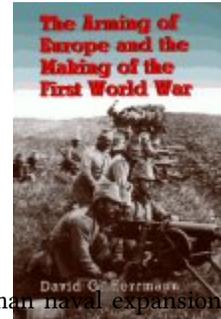


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David G. Herrmann. *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xiii + 307 S. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03374-7.

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The coming of the First World War is one of the most studied events in modern history, having generated, according to a recent account, some 25,000 books and articles (John Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate* [Oxford 1991], p. 51). Ever since Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty saddled Germany with sole responsibility for causing the conflict and based the payment of reparations on that premise, the Great War has been the subject of political and passionate debate. The nature of that debate has shifted in focus and intensity over the last three-quarters of a century only partly as a result of the availability of documentary evidence. Causality has been assigned in every conceivable direction, from individual leaders to Germany and all the Great Powers; from the international system to nationalism, capitalism, imperialism; from human biology to psychology, ethology, and anthropology.

Not surprisingly, the value of some investigations from a historical, indeed a common-sense perspective, is open to question. Tim Blanning, in a perceptive and sardonic analysis of the origins of wars, ponders the value of certain quantitative studies of the origins of the war: "When one finds such elusive imponderables as the respective desire of the Dual Alliance and the Triple Entente to change the status quo not just quantified, but reduced to three decimal points, one hardly knows whether to laugh or cry." (T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* [London, 1986], p. 17). Mercifully, the volume by David Herrmann is not of that genre.

*The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* posits the idea of a European arms race as largely responsible for bringing about the Great War. Of course, an arms race has been suggested before as an explanation of why nations went to war in 1914, but most of the

research has concentrated on German naval expansion and Britain's attempts to maintain overall superiority. What is most original and successful in this exceptionally well-researched work is its concentration on land armaments and its truly comparative nature. In a linguistic and scholarly feat of seemingly Herculean proportions, Herrmann has trawled the British, French, German, Austrian, and Italian archives—one cannot in all conscience begrudge him not using those in Russia—to gauge not only the quantitative nature of land armaments, but also their perceived effectiveness.

On the crucial question of perceptions, this work is at its best; the author is penetrating, convincing, and original. It is quite easy to show, as has already been done elsewhere (see the tables in A. J. P. Taylor's *Struggle for Mastery in Europe* [Oxford, 1971 (pb)], pp. xxv-xxx), that there was an increase in defence expenditure, the size of armies, and the quantity of armaments in the years leading up to 1914. But the fundamental question must be whether statesmen actually took account of military strengths and the likely outcome of wars when they made decisions during this period. Herrmann addresses that point and goes on to ask his supplementaries: If they did take account of military strengths, when did this occur, what did they perceive the balance to be, and how did it affect their actions? Did assessments of the strategic situation influence the decision for war in 1914 (p. 4)?

The author's response to that last question is "yes." His conclusion is reached after a careful, logical, chronological, and comparative analysis of the wide-ranging official and unofficial data on everything from national stereotypes of military effectiveness to modern technology and its deployment. He demonstrates that the military strength of the European powers was of increas-

ing interest to the public and policymakers in Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, Great Britain, and Italy; and that this interest provoked a sudden surge of army expansion following the Second Moroccan crisis of 1911, starting with the German army (p. 3). The principal European armies became engaged in a fierce competition against a background of fear of imminent war and military eclipse. Thus, Herrmann returns to one of the earliest explanations for the conflict: it was a preventive war undertaken primarily by Austria-Hungary and Germany. So it was also, to a degree, for the Entente powers who feared that if they did not stand together in 1914, the Entente might be irreparably dislocated.

The classic arms race dynamic of these years also gives rise to some unexpected imitation in the political realm. The crucial issue in getting increases in armaments and manpower was to obtain additional legislative appropriations. Herrmann shows how in Germany, then in France, not only the Right but the Left was seduced into voting to fund increased army expenditure. The largest ever expansion of the German army was voted through in 1913 by the Centre and Right Wing parties; the separate funding bill won the support of the Centre and Left, including the Social Democrats. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg garnered the support of the Left by breaking with the sacrosanct principle of protecting the economic interests of the landowning classes and levying a tax on increases in property values. The Social Democrats seized on this opportunity of securing the principle of direct taxation of wealth and voted for the bill. In similar fashion, in France a few months later the Radicals were tempted into voting for the three years of military service law because for the first time it was to be financed by a progressive property tax.

And so the leap-frogging went on until a perceived

window of opportunity was finally seized by the Central Powers in July 1914. By that time war, unlike in the past, seemed less unthinkable. Germany, without wanting a general European war, believed that the risk of provoking a widespread conflict was an acceptable one. The decision makers of nearly all the Great Powers were, for different reasons, affected by perceived changes in the balance of military power for the future, which meant not backing down in July 1914. As Herrmann says: "A general war was not the preferred outcome for any of the participants. Diplomatic victory was" (p. 219).

While not denying the importance of other explanations for the origins of the war, Herrmann suggests that because of the transformed strategic environment based on the offensive, because of the emphasis on hair-trigger land armaments as opposed to more remote navies, because of the general heightened sensitivity to imminent war, a general conflict was more likely than if the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand had taken place in 1904 or even 1911. This reviewer was certainly convinced by the subtlety of the arguments and the quality of the scholarship. In a curious example of scholarship imitating the history it is writing about, Herrmann's work will be in competition with another recently published and important book on arms races and the origins of the First World War by David Stevenson. The academic industry surrounding the origins of the Great War shows no sign of drying up. How different things would have been if the black humour of the alleged prize-winning spoof headline in the *New York Daily News* in 1920 had been true: "Archduke Found Alive, World War a Mistake."

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