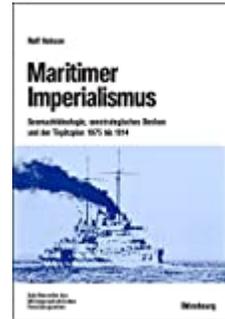


Rolf Hobson. *Maritimer Imperialismus: Seemachtideologie, seestrategisches Denken und der Tirpitzplan 1876 bis 1914.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2003. 338 S. EUR 34.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56671-0.



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Mahan's Naval Strategy and Tirpitz' German School

The Tirpitz Plan, the German fleet building program and the arms race with England prior to the First World War have been viewed from many angles. Authors have focused on political dimensions and foreign policy developments, especially the question of German responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War. In addition, others have examined economic factors; the role of the Kaiser's "luxury fleet" has been discussed against the backdrop of German domestic policy.[1] Rolf Hobson's study on "maritime imperialism," however, looks at naval armament and naval ideology from a different angle and the author comes to conclusions quite different from the views expressed by Volker Berghahn in his twenty-five-year-old study. Not only does Hobson reach far back into nineteenth-century developments concerning warfare at sea and their influence on naval thinking, but he also examines the navy and naval interests. He also places German naval armament in a wider international framework. This volume is based on Hobson's dissertation, published in 2002.[2] It speaks for the interest in his study in Germany that the Research Office for Military History (Militärhistorisches Forschungsamt) in Potsdam decided to publish a German version of his work.

In the first part, Hobson sets the frame for his analysis. After examining political developments from 1850 to 1871 and considering how they relate to warfare, he looks at the potential of British sea power. The question of sea power was closely connected with the rapid advancement of technology and the productive potential of industrialization. Hobson shows how an arms race at sea was much more complex than one on land and stresses that both had much to do with political pressure, but less with the direct preparation for war. The concluding chapter of this first part is probably the most interesting: Hobson considers attempts to find a balance, mainly through the development of regulations, such as the position of neutrals or the question of blockades. Hobson points out that the British blockade of the North Sea in the First World War was illegal, as it lacked any foundation in international law (p. 80).

Sea strategy in an industrializing world is the topic of the second part, starting with a consideration of the influential British and French "Blue Water School" and "Jeune École." Hobson then establishes the "Prussian School" as a German answer to the challenges of the new pos-

sibilities in naval warfare. The Prussian School was the strategy of a developing navy, whose major task in case of war would have been to protect the coast against bombardment and invasion. This concept started to change in the 1880s under Count Georg Leo von Caprivi, when the ability to break up a blockade was discussed. The major change in the Prussian School, whose main proponent was Alfred von Tirpitz, came in the 1890s. Influenced by Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories on sea power, Tirpitz developed the concept of shaping a fleet according to Germany's status as world power. Imperialistic policy required an imperialistic navy. But Tirpitz's concept was special. In his view, although the final goal was the protection of German interests overseas, in case of war, these interests could only be secured in Europe.

Tirpitz's plan and his "risk theory" are well known, but Hobson challenges two basic assumptions about their relationship to the outbreak of the war. He questions, on the one hand, the assumption that the German fleet program simply led to an arms race (which can be understood as a system of action-reaction); on the other, he rejects the claim that the program was a serious challenge to Britain's role as world power. Hobson draws a picture that includes the role of the army as well as German diplomacy. Germany was safe as long as it had allies on the continent; only when attempting to become the dominant continental power would Germany's position at sea be threatened.

In several chapters, Hobson also considers the institutional side of things. Military institutions as bureaucratic organizations tend to develop doctrines to demonstrate their competence (p. 56). In addition, the German navy had always been in the shade of the army, which was associated in the public mind with the victory over France 1870/71. (p. 209) Thus institutional striving for a share of the budget was combined with feelings of inferiority and

the strong desire to play the role then navy's proponents felt it deserved.

In his conclusion, Hobson provides provocative theses for critics and defenders of Tirpitz alike. He argues that Germany had been basically safe with a modern, though second-grade, fleet. The "risk theory" was superfluous, he continues, and the Tirpitz Plan a simple waste of money. Hobson concludes that, in comparison to other countries of the time, German navalism was not especially aggressive and there was no specifically German maritime expansionism.

Hobson's study is an outstanding work about the navy and its role in German politics prior to the First World War. It fills a major gap in the interpretation of the *Kaiserreich*. The book has only few flaws. First, the analysis is mainly based on published works and not many archival sources have been used. In spite of the title, most of the study deals with developments prior to 1900; the actual realization of the Tirpitz plan is not given as much attention as is its development. Moreover, the actual role of German men-of-war overseas is widely ignored in this monograph. Thus it makes imperialism seem like a European topic—but imperialism without empire has also been quite common in older German research. But these flaws will not detract from the book's overall value. It contains many points worth debating and will hopefully inspire further study.

Notes

[1]. The standard work remains Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971).

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

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