



Albert Hopman, Michael Epkenhans. *Das ereignisreiche Leben eines "Wilhelminers": Tagebücher, Briefe, Aufzeichnungen 1901 bis 1920.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2004. 1231 S. EUR 49.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56840-0.

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Wilhelminian from the Second Row: The Diaries and Letters of Admiral Albert Hopman

The German naval officer corps considered itself the "Elite des Kaisers."^[1] During the reign of Wilhelm II, however, the Imperial German Navy, which had always taken second place in public notice to the admired Prussian army, rose from its modest origins to symbolize German imperial ambitions. A high-ranking officer of the Imperial German Navy like Admiral Albert Hopman might be thought of as the quintessential "Wilhelminian." The navy's vision was broader than that of many German politicians of the time and, from Crown Prince Wilhelm to the Social Democratic politician Georg Ledebour, it was believed that naval officers held a wider view of the world than their comrades in the army and were able to look "beyond the barrack square." A closer look at a personality like Albert Hopman thus promises interesting insights into the military policy and social life of the later German *Kaiserreich*.

The first impression a reader gets from this biographical volume on Albert Hopman is that the book is heavy. Its sheer weight testifies to Michael Epkenhans's efforts in writing and compiling a huge amount of material about Hopman's life. The work is a combination of biography and biographical documents and Epkenhans has used a combination of valuable and rare material. In addition to the official documents of the navy stored in the German military archive in Freiburg im Breisgau, he also made use of Hopman's diaries there and enhanced the documentation he provides with private points of view drawn from the correspondence between the admiral, his wife and their eldest son. The book has two parts,

first a long biographical article, followed by the much longer collection of documents. The documents are listed in chronological order, but not numbered. To help the reader through this mass of paper, an extensive index of persons has been added.

Reading through the volume shows how rewarding it is to look at the elites of the Kaiserreich "from the second row" (p. 1). Hopman rose to the highest ranks, but did not belong to the circle of the most prominent figures and his name is not as familiar today as admirals like Alfred von Tirpitz or Reinhard Scheer. His career was typical in many respects; he advanced through the ranks and switched frequently between duty at sea and in the admiralty in Berlin. He was also given exceptional positions and assignments, such as his detachment as naval attaché in Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War^[2] or his attachment to the General Staff in the early phase of World War I. Hopman was important enough to have attained entry into the inner circles of German politics and of course, mainly, the Imperial Navy. Though he was neither an intellectual nor a liberal and in the question of the German fleet he was loyal to his superior, Tirpitz, he can still be considered a critical and independent commentator.

Epkenhans rightfully portrays Hopman as a typical man of his age. Born in 1865, he had just reached the higher stages of his career after the beginning of Wilhelm II's reign in 1888. Hopman felt at home in the politics of the later Kaiserreich, during which as large parts of the

Bürger were concerned about colonial policy, fleet building and the general necessity of Germany's struggle for a "place in the sun." Like Max Weber, he had been socialized during the reign of Wilhelm I; both men shared the understanding that Germany's unification had been only the foundation of this new period and that the tasks for their generation were still to come. Hopman shared the views of Tirpitz, under whom he had worked in the Reichsmarineamt.

In other respects Hopman was less typical, which makes his diaries and letters even more interesting. During his career he grew increasingly skeptical of Germany's political system, especially of the monarchy as represented by Wilhelm II. He had seen the vanity and high-handedness of the kaiser well before 1914 and the monarch's miserable failure during the war disillusioned him even more. As early as the Moltke-Harden Trial of 1907, Hopman had thoughts about the desirability of a purely parliamentary system; after the war had started, he even considered the development of democracy (p. 35). These ideas did not mitigate his desire for a strong leader in the 1920s, a sentiment fed continually by his growing anxiety about the Bolshevik threat. During the July Crisis of 1914, Hopman had not acted as a warmonger. On July 21, he wrote to his wife that he did not believe Europe would go to war because of Serbia (p. 392). From the very beginning of the conflict he did not share the optimistic notions of many Germans. He saw the war as a disaster and in March 1916 wrote to his wife that Germany could at best get out of the war with a draw and should be glad if the result was not even worse (p. 790).

The volume provides material to those interested in German naval policy, politics and social history. Hopman was close to Tirpitz and witnessed the buildup of the German navy, the negotiations with Great Britain

and also the difficult position after the outbreak of World War I, when the navy was forced into a passive role. The volume also includes rich material on German politics, although it is, of course, closely connected to naval policy. Interesting in this respect is, for example, Tirpitz's plan in spring 1915 for a coup to remove Wilhelm II from office. The perspective provided by Hopman's personal documents gives lively information about Hopman's experiences and views. He was a good observer and his writing is interesting and entertaining, which makes the book much better reading than one might expect.

My only regret is that more documents from Hopman's earlier career could not be included. The edition concentrates on politics before, during and after the war, with the most emphasis, over 700 pages, falling on the war alone. More information about the earlier period surely would have provided more insight into German naval history beyond the well known paths of Tirpitz and his High Seas Fleet. The editor does, however, have the available sources on his side, as the only diary left before 1904 is from 1885. This edition draws attention to the rich body of "ego documents" in German archives still waiting to be published. Epkenhans points out that a great deal of rich material remains to be excavated in the Military Archive alone (p. 5). This volume is a good example how rewarding it can be to make these papers available to academics and a wider audience.

Notes

[1]. Holger H. Herwig, *Das Elitekorps des Kaisers* (Hamburg: H. Christians, 1977).

[2]. Cord Eberspaecher, "The Road to Jutland? The War and the Imperial German Navy," in *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, ed. Rotem Kowner (London: Routledge, 2007), 290-305.

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