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Jan Rüger. *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 356 S. $101.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87576-9.

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The Navy as Cultural Symbol

In the introduction to *The Great Naval Game*, Jan RÃ¼ger indicates that his book "is as much influenced by cultural, social and political history as it is by naval and maritime history" (p. 5).[1] Indeed, this book must not be read as just another "war book" reexamining the line-up in 1914 in terms of tonnage, gun ranges, cannon bore, etc.–what RÃ¼ger calls "technology" (p. 209). Instead, he presents the descent into war, from the elimination of Otto von Bismarck in 1890 to the first shots (on land) in August 1914, as a spectacle in which most of the audience and many of the participants were consenting victims of a national cultural delusion. The "naval race" and the stage management that went with it were pure make-believe, and the "real" war (decided on land, as it turned out and as might have been expected considering Germany's geographical position in Europe) exposed the "fundamental contradiction between the rhetoric of the naval theatre and the reality of international affairs" (p. 243). This "rhetoric" is at the center of the book, and RÃ¼ger compares and contrasts the approach to naval affairs in Britain and Germany in the two decades that preceded the First World War in that light (though the epilogue takes the story to 2005 and the celebrations of Trafalgar).[2]

In Germany, by the early 1910s, a high-ranking personage of the empire, like Ambassador Anton Graf Monts, could deplore that the naval race was lost, if only because Germany needed to concentrate on army expenditure: "The primacy at land *and* at sea was beyond the resources of even such a great and diligent people as the Germans" (p. 242). Why, then, did the kaiser continue to pursue this costly chimera–costly in the prewar years from a financial point of view, and costly in the war years because the German Imperial Navy (apart from its submarines) played such a reduced role that it became obvious that the money would have been better spent on land forces?

Likewise, in Britain, no less than the First Sea Lord complained to Admiral David Beatty in November 1918 that the Royal Navy had been deprived of the great decisive battle Ã la Trafalgar, for which it craved so much in 1914, and *horribile dictu* the hero of the British press was not one of them, but Marshal Ferdinand Foch. In Beatty's words, "The Navy has won a victory even more complete in its effects than Trafalgar, but less spectacular, and, be-

cause of this *lack of display*, one feels that the unthinking do not fully realise what the nation–indeed what the whole world, owes to the British Navy" (p. 258). RÃ¼ger rightly notes the vocabulary, with words like "spectacular" and "display," which reinforces his central argument of the theatricality of it all. Admittedly, he states the obvious when he writes that this insistence on appearances cannot be "divorced from fundamental political questions," but then he explains that in both countries the naval high command "saw the huge potential of this maritime stage for promoting the navy and the monarchy in the age of mass politics" (p. 90). Where the two countries differed was in the manipulative tactics used for that promotion.

Fundamentally, in Britain, the Royal Navy was taken for granted as the major instrument for the defense of the island. There need be no "invention of tradition" to justify the primacy of the navy as such–or was there? RÃ¼ger insists on the transformation of the Royal Navy in those years from an English navy to a British navy, though with the Lord Provost of Glasgow, the "Second City of the Empire" and its major shipbuilding center, showing a dual persona: as first magistrate of the city, he welcomed the economic activity generated by the naval race, but as a prominent British citizen, he deplored it (p. 247). Still, RÃ¼ger has no doubt that the mystique of the Royal Navy was a potent factor in reinforcing the union behind its king. Another potential factor for dislocation was the overseas empire, and here again RÃ¼ger convincingly adduces evidence to show how the political leaders of Australia and New Zealand as well as other colonial politicians were invited to participate in the frequent Naval Reviews and other "fÃªtes" associated with the fleet in London–and how they went back to their respective countries confirmed in their imperial loyalty. The naming of new ships, after non-English, indeed sometimes non-British, cities (e.g., *Dublin*) or after imperial territories (e.g., *Zealandia*), was meant to add to this image of indissoluble union of the British Isles and their overseas empire behind the Royal Navy.

The big difference in Germany is that it had no naval tradition worth mentioning when the kaiser undertook to build an imperial fleet that would match the Royal Navy. This uphill task is illustrated in the book through three main strands: the harking back to the Hanse, the amalgamation of Germany's past glory on land and future glory on the sea, and the assimilation of the Darwinian struggle to finding a place in the sun–at sea. Not unexpectedly, owing to the nonmilitary and disparate nature of the old Hanseatic league, RÃ¼ger sees an "ersatz tradition" in the kaiser's effort to present the building of his imperial fleet "as the logical continuation of the Hanse's attempt at establishing Germany as a major sea power" (p. 158). More to the point was the appeal to the old Germanic notion of a people made up of tribes whose unity was forged by blood and iron. For adherents to that thesis, like Helmut von Moltke, this legacy could be transposed to the navy. RÃ¼ger speaks of the "projection of military values and army tradition on to the navy," with the idea that "the Imperial Navy would repeat on the sea what the Prussian army had achieved on land" (p. 161).

The interpretation of Darwinism as "the struggle for life" was eminently suited for this "blood and iron" conception, and the book excellently explains how the shift to naval tradition operated. The central element was the theory expounded by the human geographer Friedrich Ratzel (who we are told "put the word *Lebensraum* on to the scholarly map of the nineteenth century" [p. 212]) in his book, *Das Meer als Quelle der VÃ¶lkergrÃ¶sse. Eine politisch-geographische Studie* (1900) ("The sea as the source of the greatness of peoples: a politico-geographical study"–reviewer's translation), which rested on two premises. According to Ratzel, the sea was " 'the space in which nations competed for access to new *Lebensraum*,' " in the form of "'colonies and overseas possessions"'; and it was "'the source not only of power and wealth, but also of a nation's identity and culture"' (p. 213). In this example, German imperial thinking converged with British imperial thinking as forcefully expressed by Winston Churchill in 1909: "the fleet was not just a military instrument, it was an expression of 'English civilization"' (p. 214).

In both countries, this cultural dimension was reinforced by the pageantry and media coverage, openly encouraged in Britain from the start, but subject to more reticence in Germany. RÃ¼ger describes how the public and the press were invited to attend the magnificent free spectacle of the regular Fleet Reviews on the Thames or in the Solent. Those who could not attend were able to watch the show in cinemas, which were by then thriving. He writes about a "mass market" involving "the popular press, the cinema and the tourist industry," a "dynamic public market in which politics and culture were increasingly inseparable" (pp. 54, 55).

In Germany, *Flottenschauspiele* and *Marineschauspiele* were the rage: the Berlin "Fleet playhouse" that opened in 1904 "could seat up to 4,000 visitors," who could watch large model warships parading on an artifi-

cial lake before the imperial yacht (p. 60). In 1911, yielding before this popular enthusiasm for "his" navy, the kaiser–always fearful of spying–finally allowed the presence of an official press boat and tourist steamers during Kiel Week, thus formally opening "a previously private royal and naval ritual to the public" (p. 83). Germany also differed from Britain in that the subsidiary role given to women in naval celebrations was more obvious–as could only be expected in a country whose ideology was dominated by the *MÃ¤nnerbund* (which RÃ¼ger translates as "male brotherhood" [p. 135]).

Yet, however much they may have differed in superficial respects, the two countries were animated by the same *forces profondes*, RÃ¼ger argues, indirectly referring to the work of Eric Hobsbawm on the "invention of tradition" and that of Linda Colley on forging Britishness.[3] "Both in Britain and Germany," RÃ¼ger states, "the navy was thus a cultural symbol that brought together some of the most important sources of the nineteenth-century construction of the nation: monarchy, empire, technology, gender, war and geography" (p. 196).

The main difficulty associated with this seductive thesis is the weight of words in different cultural traditions and national contexts. We may accept that the signifiers "technology" and "Technologie" conveyed the same notions in 1913 Britain and Germany–but what about "Empire" and "Reich"? And, did the collective mentalities of the two countries have the same conception of war or of the monarchy? Were the perceptions of the importance of geography the same? RÃ¼ger includes a section on the "Island nation," which discusses Rudyard Kipling and Henry Newbolt, but curiously he does not mention William Shakespeare's moat, a source of pride and reassurance to all Britons from their school days. A fundamental difference in the perception of the importance of geography must necessarily have been the realization by every thinking German that his country had no such natural protection "against the envy of less happier lands."[4]

The book also purports to nuance the common insistence on "German peculiarities" by suggesting that at least in the naval domain the *Sonderweg*, "special path," was not as special as most people think (pp. 7, 94). But, the discussion is never clear on this point, and the reader is at a loss to find a satisfactory answer to the question that the author asks, "What does this mean for the long-standing debate about militarism in Germany" (p. 137). His extremely well-documented study of the "bread and circuses" aspect, which is the object of a full chapter, does not really point to the fact that the "game," which is the object of his book, turned out in the long run to be a far more dangerous one for the German population.

In his epilogue, sustaining Margaret Anderson's point of view that the *Kaiserreich*'s "worst legacy to the next generation was not its political culture, but its war," RÃ¼ger blames "the trauma of the war" for the rise of Adolf Hitler–but one could equally well argue that the trauma would not have been so devastating if the expectations raised by militarist spectacles, like the *Flottenschauspiele*, had not been so high (p. 266).[5] If the result had not been such a tragic one for the German people, in 1918 and even more so in 1945, one might play on RÃ¼ger's own words and say that the German elite had been caught at their own game. The popular postwar disappointment in Britain over the "land fit for heroes," which did not materialize, was, of course, nothing to compare, at least from the politico-military point of view and the danger to world peace.

I would, therefore, argue that the limits of comparative cultural history are once more in evidence in this extremely difficult field of Anglo-German attitudes to military questions, be they the memory of battle in Stefan Goebel's book in the same series or the naval race in this one.[6] This, of course, does not detract from the high scholarly value of this thoroughly researched monograph, with copious and convenient footnoting, a superbly comprehensive bibliography of publications in both English and German, a carefully selected index, and an uncommon–and therefore extremely informative–choice of illustrations. It will constitute required reading for specialists of early twentieth-century history as well as comparative European cultural history, and for scholars interested in research on the origins of the First World War, from both the British and German angles. It should, of course, be in all university libraries.

Notes

[1]. The title of the review is taken from a quotation in this book (p. 3).

[2]. For a more complete discussion and excellent coverage of the ceremonies at Trafalgar, see Holger Hoock, ed., *History, Commemoration and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a review on H-Diplo, see Antoine Capet, "Napoleon Ought Never To Be Confused with Nelson," review of *History, Commemoration and National Preoccupation*, `http://www.`

h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=181221202233548.

[3]. RÃ¼ger specifically mentions the following publications: Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 101-164; David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition,' " in *Invention of Tradition*, 263-307; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); and Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument," *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 309-329.

[4]. "This precious stone set in the silver sea, / Which serves it in the office of a wall / Or as a moat defensive to a house, / Against the envy of less happier lands, /–This … England." William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, act 2, scene 1.

[5]. Margaret Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[6]. Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a review on H-Albion, see Antoine Capet, "Some Are More Medievalist than Others," review of *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=15631191169780.

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