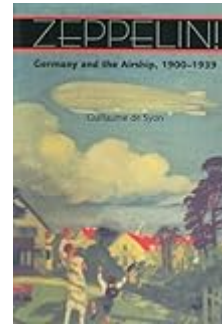




Guillaume de Syon. *Zeppelin!: Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. 312 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6734-7.



Reviewed by Michael Thad Allen (Georgia Institute of Technology)

Published on H-German (July, 2002)

This well-illustrated book contains several photographs of giant masses of doped fabric and metal hulls wrenched into shapes akin to the balloons twisted by carnival clowns, but Guillaume de Syon argues that the Zeppelin airships were far more than technological boondoggles and failures—although they were also that. Despite dynamic publicity and ingenious engineering, the airships failed in both war and peace for more than thirty years. But to de Syon the failure is the intriguing thing. Failures, he notes, can tell us as much or more about techno-nationalism than success. How did this “machine that was neither practical nor designed for mass consumption nevertheless [assume] a central place in determining European understandings of aviation technology” (p. 207)? The dirigible was far more effective as a symbol than it ever was as a flying machine, and so it remains. While we do not call airplanes “Wrights” or hot air balloons “Montgolfiers,” “Zeppelin” (eponym of Graf Ferdinand von Zeppelin) has retained enough aura to serve as the name of the rock band that invented heavy metal.

Rigid frame airships captured the popular imagination by providing a surplus of what David Nye has called the “technological sublime”[1]: Zeppelins impressed with sheer scale, geometrical precision, soaring heights, and complexity. On the other hand, all Ger-

mans could witness them in common. Mass audiences gathered spontaneously in fields, town squares, and roof tops to watch them pass. The blimps provided a spectacle in which all, rich and poor, were humbled and bidden to feel small; at the same time, Germans saw them as the embodiment of the national “inventive spirit” and other hallowed values of Germandom. David Nye identifies the technological sublime as unique to American nationalism, but de Syon convincingly shows that it was prevalent in Germany as well. German nationalism has become a distasteful subject because of the Nazi period, but de Syon’s most intriguing and original contribution here is to show how varied “Germandom” could be over time. The Zeppelin’s symbolism changed subtly through three political regimes. And precisely because it predated National Socialism, its symbolism was not inexhaustibly protean. In Wilhelmine Germany the blimp quickly became associated with Germany’s search for a “place in the sun”; it was a visual example of the surging industrial might that Germans expected to convert into world power status. But de Syon is quick to point out that the airship did not just symbolize generic nationalism. Many saw it as a German symbol precisely because the Graf himself was often at odds with Prussian officialdom. One contemporary satiric cartoon shows a Zeppelin approaching Berlin, coattails draped over its posterior. Turning aft at Brandenburg gate, it raises them

and moons the Kaiser. Thus the blimps were an icon of imperial bourgeois counter-culture.

By 1914 the Zeppelins had become another symbol of what Paul Fussler has identified as the giant, cruel irony of World War I.[2] The German General Staff felt loath to abandon the airships for fear of the public outcry, despite reservations about their tactical utility. Of 117 commissioned airships, the Entente powers shot down thirty-nine. A further forty-two were lost to other factors. When the Graf died in 1917, as tireless a promoter as ever, his passing was not necessarily mourned by the military brass. His constant hawkish calls to use the airships for bloody vengeance were not only unrealistic; they obstructed Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg's attempts to arrange a negotiated settlement.

The rigid-frame airships survived the war, now as icons in a political religion of German modern identity. In the Weimar Republic, the airships' persistence was owed mostly to the tireless promotion of Hugo Eckener (who briefly flirted with running for president in 1932 against Adolf Hitler). From 1918 to 1933 the Zeppelin symbolized Germans' unique "cultural" achievements at a time when few others remained to them. It was also a symbol of the injustice of the Versailles treaty, which required Germans to dismantle its aircraft industry. If obeyed to the letter, Eckener and others argued, the airships—a unique German contribution to the progress of humanity—would be lost. The Zeppelin corporation launched transatlantic flights, an international scientific expedition to the North Pole, and planned routes to South America and Africa in the name of knitting the world together in peace and commerce.

One of de Syon's most intriguing chapters turns to the Zeppelin in Hitler's Germany. The blimp offered almost irresistible symbolic capital: it was serenely, gigantically phallic; it meshed well with public spectacle and with Hitler's own cult of flying; and it offered massive "advertising space" for the Swastika. Propagandists went to some length to subsume the Zeppelin into symbolism of a unified "Volksgemeinschaft," yet it proved as unmanageable in the rarified atmosphere of the signified and signifier as in the real, existing skies over Germany.

Eckener himself seems to have been something of a monarchist and no proponent of autarky. He ordered his crewmen to waive the imperial colors rather than the Nazi flag during flyovers of Nazi rallies. Eckener, fumed Goebbels, placed himself "outside the Volksgemeinschaft," yet attempts to sideline him only generated negative publicity at home and abroad (p. 182). The ques-

tion was how to purge this symbol and its managers of their deep association with internationalism and pacifism. To Republicans, the Zeppelins had stood for democracy; to monarchists for Empire; to socialists and communists for coming revolution. When the Hindenberg exploded in Lakehurst, New Jersey on May 6, 1937, the Nazis dismantled the airship program. On February 20, 1940 the Air Ministry actually took the gratuitous measure of destroying the remaining airships. So ended the airship age at the dawn of a new total war.

Despite its strengths, some parts of de Syon's book remain unconvincing. On rather weak secondary-source evidence dating from the mid-1980s, he identifies a flagging public enthusiasm for technology around 1900 which supposedly was reversed "quickly," so quickly that by 1903-1904 the Zeppelins had helped effect a "shift in technical and military thought" (p. 27). I, at least, doubted that public dyspepsia with technology was really such a mass phenomenon, especially in such a short time window. De Syon does show that Zeppelin's first dirigible flight on July 2, 1900 and two others in October proved only moderate successes, engendering no popular enthusiasm and little funding. He takes this as evidence that the popular mood had to shift for there to be a Zeppelin-mania. Only in the summer of 1908, when the celebrated Luftschiff Zeppelin 4 was forced down and destroyed in fields near Echterdingen, did the public rally in a Zeppelin craze. That event is told by de Syon in even more vivid detail than Peter Fritzsche's account in *A Nation of Flyers* (Harvard, 1992). What had changed in just a few years to evoke the outpouring of enthusiasm for this German flying machine? Might the sudden explosion of blimp-ophilia mark a spike in a much longer, continuous preoccupation with techno-nationalism? Perhaps the most standard work, Joachim Radkau in *Technik in Deutschland* (Suhrkamp, 1989), credits the turn of the last century with the birth of a "new generation of technology" and a concomitant technological enthusiasm (pp. 22-39). The summer of 1908 was the very same in which Wilbur Wright brought his airplane to Europe. As Robert Wohl has shown, heavier than air flight was notable for the dominance of the French and Americans. Might not the Germans have yearned for their unique lighter-than-air craft to counter these so evident achievements? But this is only a minor quibble with the very stimulating symbolic analysis in de Syon's well-written book. There is something here for popular enthusiasts of the history of flight as well as material that will stimulate further research.

Notes

[1]. David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (MIT Press, 1994).

[2]. Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Michael Thad Allen. Review of de Syon, Guillaume, *Zeppelin!: Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6521>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.