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Dirk Bönker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States before World War I*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. x, 421. ISBN 978-0-8014-5040-2.

Review by J. Furman Daniel, III, The George Washington University (jfdaniel@gwu.edu).

Recent years have seen a sharp rise in academic and popular interest in naval planning prior to World War I.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the topic typically treat it as a tragic contest between Germany and Great Britain, precipitated by brilliant technological and organizational triumphs that posed a threat to the security of Europe through a sequence of personal and diplomatic failures.<sup>2</sup> While these works cover a wide range of diplomatic, technical, bureaucratic, and military subjects, they often ignore the importance of naval discourse in shaping this antagonism and the critical role of the United States as an active participant in the global military competition. In *Militarism in a Global Age*, Dirk Bönker (Duke) corrects these flaws by studying the discursive processes among naval elites in Germany and the United States prior to the outbreak of the Great War.

While Bönker focuses on the specific cases of Germany and the United States, he sees their experiences as typifying a pro-navalist militarism pervasive among the great powers. He argues that a careful analysis of the influence of naval elites sheds light on the politics of the age, with its interconnected institutions, industries, military strategies, and national identities. More than merely a study of a narrow military problem, Bönker's book is rather a social history of the links between militarist discourse and the sources of power in Germany and America:

Naval arms buildups cast their long shadow on the domestic politics of all countries, as political centers promoted policies of naval expansion and naval officers jockeyed for power and influence in systems of governance. Galvanizing national publics and interest groups, the pursuit of maritime force became a focal point of political mobilization, public debate, and national identity politics. Naval expansion also gave rise to broader popular cults and folkloric appropriations of the navy. Mediated by fast-developing mass media, the pursuit of maritime force entered the world of popular entertainment and consumption in the shape of spectacle and theatre. Sea power became a focal point of mass longings and personal desires. (3)

By design, this book is *not* about the pre-World War I naval-arms race, but rather combines a “cross-national comparative history with the thematic concerns of transnational history” (15). Bönker highlights remarkable similarities in the German and American cases in both their overarching goals and the rhetorical means their policy makers used to achieve those ends. After a brief introduction, he divides his work into four main sections, each detailing a particular commonality in German and US efforts to fulfill their naval ambitions.

Part 1, “Military Force, National Industry, and Global Politics: Naval Strategies of World Power,” explains how Germany and the United States developed comparable grand strategies that privileged naval power and force projection. Bönker notes that, while their naval policies were not designed to provoke war, both countries saw the development of naval power as essential to full national maturity. Germany did not wish to instigate an unwinnable arms race with England; it wanted an equal status among world powers

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1. See, e.g., most recently, Shawn T. Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Pr, 2012); C.I. Hamilton, *The Making of the Modern Admiralty: British Naval Policy-Making, 1805-1927* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011); Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2011), reviewed by L. Grant, *MiWSR* 2012-011; Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2012); and Matthew S. Seligmann, *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901-1914: Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War against Germany* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012).

2. See, esp., Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (NY: Prometheus, 1983), Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (NY: Random House, 1991), and Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900-1914* (NY: David McKay, 1974).

and assurances of British “fair play.” Furthermore, Germany wanted to be perceived as having, “alliance value” to non-aligned nations as a means of protecting its interests from British naval hegemony (33–34).

American claims to world power status were more restrained because of a disjunct domestic perception of the nation’s rightful global role. This lack of consensus led to a less imperialist view of how the US navy might promote American interests. The prime objective was enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine, not direct conflict with Europe, Africa, or Western Asia.<sup>3</sup> Despite their differences, the centrality of naval preparedness in both Germany and the United States triggered a vicious cycle of military spending, unintended antagonism, fears of vulnerability, and rumors of war: “arms races became a substitute for war and armaments the key currency of great-power politics” (74).

In part 2, “The Cult of the Battle: Approaches to Maritime Warfare,” Bönker highlights German and American concepts of battlefleet warfare: both nations, in accordance with existing treatises on land warfare, stressed the need for decisive battle.<sup>4</sup> While both contemplated alternatives to capital-ship-based approaches,<sup>5</sup> they ultimately wedded their national strategies to a rigid doctrine of battlefleet warfare. The creation of modern fleets was intellectually justified by disparate theories ranging from the philosophy of Carl Schmitt and the geopolitical predictions of Halford Mackinder to the more topical naval writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan. As a result of their shared philosophies, leaders in both nations promoted the construction and maintenance of powerful surface forces that could directly challenge their opponents’ battlefleets.

In part 3, “The Quest for Power: The Navy, Governance, and the Nation,” Bönker examines how their naval programs posed serious internal political challenges for both nations, despite significant differences in their governmental structures. Although the German navy used a more formal and bureaucratic approach to naval lobbying, policy makers in both countries pursued similar public relations strategies to win the trust and patronage of key legislative and executive actors. These included the creation of naval leagues and advocacy organizations, the manipulation of print media and other propaganda outlets, the orchestration of elaborate naval reviews or “parades,” and the adroit use of film clips and movies to create excitement about naval projects. These efforts became almost evangelical in tone, fusing moralistic reforms and national unity in the ongoing “work of continually manufacturing consent” (223).

The fourth and final part of the book, “A Militarism of Experts: Naval Professionalism and the Making of Navalism,” shows how naval elites in both nations inserted themselves into the national discourse, posing as apolitical public servants uniquely knowledgeable about the technical and strategic requirements of building and maintaining a modern navy.<sup>6</sup> Both Germany and the United States used the General Staff of the German Army as their model for creating a permanent professional organization that would legitimize their navies’ expansions.<sup>7</sup> While Alfred von Tirpitz dominated the political discourse in Germany, American proponents of naval expansion included mostly prominently George Dewey, Alfred Mahan, and Theodore Roosevelt, who “simultaneously engaged in a common trans-Atlantic discourse ... and participated in the imaginings and consensus among national intelligentsias in each country.... German and U.S. naval cultures were cut from the same cloth” (303–4). Although the two cultures eventually took divergent paths in World

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3. For an interesting analysis of how domestic fractures affected American foreign policy around the turn of the twentieth century, see Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1998).

4. For the difficulty of achieving decisive battle on land, see Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1991), and Robert Citino, *The Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2002).

5. Germany considered the use of torpedo boats and various coastal defense measures, whereas the United States debated the deploying of fast cruisers for commerce raiding (107–16). On the cyclical nature of cruiser warfare and commerce raiding in the American naval tradition, see Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People’s Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (NY: Free Press, 1991).

6. On the place of national discourse in encouraging imperial overstretch, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1991).

7. See, esp., Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640–1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1964), and Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807–1945* (NY: Prentice Hall, 1977).

War I and the interwar period, prior to the Great War, their naval establishments spoke a common language of sea power and naval superiority.

Bönker's work may disappoint some general readers of military history. Though impressive in its attention to detail and excellent research, the book assumes a well informed audience tolerant of a purposely academic, at times repetitive and cumbersome prose style. Readers seeking a general history of the politics of the naval arms race will be better served by the more accessible histories of Robert K. Massie<sup>8</sup> or Peter Padfield.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its limits, *Militarism in a Global Age* fills an important niche by elucidating the tactics and influence of public discourse during the lead-up to the First World War. Those with significant prior knowledge of the subject who desire a unique perspective on the social history of the era will find the book rewarding and intellectually stimulating.<sup>10</sup> Its true value is twofold. First, it situates the politics of naval expansion within a rich and interconnected societal context too often oversimplified in more general accounts. Second, it reveals parallels between the pre-World War II navalist communities in Germany and the United States while illuminating the nature of militarism and popular movements within broader human societies. These virtues will provoke serious reflection on the role of elite groups in manipulating national discourse and leading their nations down the path to war.<sup>11</sup>

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8. See note 2 above and *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany and the Winning of the Great War* (NY: Random House, 2003).

9. See note 2 above.

10. The social history of the period is a crowded and rich academic field. For a powerful argument about how the intelligentsia of Europe generally supported the war, see Roland N. Stromberg, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1982). For an alternative view, claiming that the vast majority of Europeans did *not* desire war in 1914, see Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011). On the deeply entrenched militarism within German culture, see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2005). A chilling, Darwinian approach to German culture and the outbreak of European war is taken in Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. A.H. Powles (NY: Longmans, 1914).

11. On the exploitation of social discourse regarding defense policy by present-day American elites, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2010).