

**Sebastian Rojek, Versunkene Hoffnungen. Die Deutsche Marine im Umgang mit Erwartungen und Enttäuschungen 1871–1930, München (De Gruyter Oldenbourg) 2017, XII–513 S. (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 116), ISBN 978-3-11-052903-6, EUR 64,95.**

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In this ambitious monograph, Sebastian Rojek seeks to shed new interpretive light on the Second German Empire's pursuit of naval power. He casts the Wilhelmine build-up of a battle fleet as a technocratic, expert-led »Großplanungsprojekt« that promised big rewards in a glorious future yet eventually met with utter failure (p. 4). He then places the navy elite's management of expectations and disappointments at the »Schnittstelle zwischen Öffentlichkeit und innerinstitutionellem Selbstverständnis« at the center of his analysis (p. 3). »Versunkene Hoffnungen« explores the navy's management of this endeavor's shifting fortunes in three communicative arenas: parliament, the German public, and top-level governmental leadership. The main bulk of the analysis is devoted to World War I and the post-war period as the moments of failure and its subsequent processing, with tentacles reaching into the 1950s and 1960s. The first quarter of the book covers the pre-war period and its politics of expectations, beginning with the navy's performance in the German Wars of Unification.

Entering a crowded field of scholarship, Rojek offers his analysis as a contribution to an »enlarged« military history that moves beyond the study of operations and technology to explore matters of perception, imagination, and interpretation. He also presents it as a paradigmatic interrogation of the handling and overall relevance of expectations and disappointments in Germany during the »long« turn of the twentieth century, the age of »classical modernity«. While the book's focus is resolutely kept on the realm of the navy and on the institution's ultimate »Lernunfähigkeit« and »Selbstbezogenheit« (p. 8), Rojek concludes his fine study with a call for comparative work involving both other institutions within Germany and the military services of other countries. Conceptually, his analysis draws heavily, and successfully, on the analytical vocabulary developed by sociologist Heinrich Popitz in his work on belief systems and the »loss of reality« in social groups.

»Versunkene Hoffnungen« is a deeply researched, clearly argued, and conceptually innovative monograph. From its particular vantage point, the book expands on the extensive scholarship on the Wilhelmine navy and its legacy, which has already paid considerable attention to the service's interest in managing public opinion. The study directly echoes recent scholarship in its focus on the technocratic politics of expertise that was central to the navy's navalist project, which fused the causes of global power, the nation, the navy, and expert rule together. Empirically, Rojek breaks new ground primarily in his analysis of the wartime and post-war periods, although in the pre-war sections of the book, the extensive analysis of the public debate prompted by the sinking of the ironclad



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cruiser *Großer Kurfürst* in 1878 also stands out as a piece of original analysis.

Overall, Rojek paints a clear picture. In his analysis of the pre-war years, he emphasizes how the pursuit of battleship building, as a long-term project to which the highest expectations were attached, depended from the beginning on the navy's continuous projection of professional rationality and competence and its defense of its policy autonomy as an expert institution vis-à-vis not only the Reichstag, national publics, and civilian governmental leaders, but also the emperor and critics from within the service.

Until the war, Navy Secretary Alfred von Tirpitz proved most adept at producing a public image of the fast-developing navy as a superior institution central to Germany's present and future as a global power and worthy of the expectations associated with it, thereby ensuring this branch of the military a »hohes gesellschaftliches Ansehen und eine breite Vertrauensbasis« (p. 440). Tirpitz did so despite the developing sense of disappointment and crisis shared by him and other navy policy-makers, who came to realize only too well that the German naval build-up would fail to accomplish its original objectives and yet kept this insight hidden from public view.

In his analysis of developments during World War I, Rojek explores how the navy's policy-makers directly confronted failure and entered an era of open disappointment. The all-too-apparent bankruptcy of pre-war strategy, as encapsulated in the passivity and irrelevance of a high seas fleet that proved unable to deliver decisive victory in battle or to prevent the British blockade, raised troubling questions about the public standing of the navy and imperiled its very future as a viable institution, regardless of the outcome of the war (as well as the naval propagandists' efforts to celebrate the course of the battle of Jutland as a validation of pre-war policy).

Confronted with the reality check of war, navy leaders such as Tirpitz proved unwilling to admit failure. Instead, claims Rojek, they redirected expectations through wartime improvisation, that is, the advocacy of submarine warfare as a war-winning measure, repeatedly promising certain success within a clearly defined time frame and holding up this promise with increased fanaticism and ever-moving goalposts until the end of the war. Eventually, in their despair over the course of the war and the future of Germany and their own service, navy leaders turned to apocalyptic thinking. In their plans for a fleet sortie in the fall of 1918, they considered the destruction of the fleet in battle as the only way to erase the disappointing wartime record of the navy and assure its rebirth in some post-war future.

After the defeat, representatives of the navy processed their experience of disappointment and failure through historical apologetics, the subject of Rojek's analysis for the post-war period. Far from entailing a reconsideration of the original agenda and promises, the navy's »maritime Geschichtspolitik« (p. 255) produced apologetic narratives that affirmed pre-war rationales and convictions, treated seeming failure as validation of previous commitments, and defended the record of the navy against any critics, civilian and military, including critical voices from within the service. The goal was to shape public debates about the past, present, and future of Germany's pursuit of naval power.

Beginning with his memoirs, published in 1919, Tirpitz took the lead in this effort, relying on a circle of fellow (retired) officers yet also enlisting



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the support of civilian historians Fritz Kern and Hans Hallmann, who lent the apologetic endeavor scholarly expertise and credibility. The official history of the navy in World War I, whose writings was sponsored by the newly-created so-called Marinearchiv, led by Eberhard von Mantey, became another center for rehabilitatory history, representing the service's own effort to write naval history for public consumption.

»Versunkene Hoffnungen« is full of erudite analysis and fascinating detail. No doubt, the book will become a touchstone for future scholarship. Of course, its considerable achievement is nonetheless also defined by its limitations. Rojek's primary focus is on the navy's communicative strategies for outside consumption, as opposed to the inner, expert realm of professional discourse within the navy. But officers dealt with expectations and disappointments within their own professional and communicative realm as well. In fact, the navy strove to deal with its miscalculations and experiences of failure in a productive manner, that is, in a way that generated new ideas and practices for present-day and future naval strategy and operations.

The wartime redirection of expectation, historical apologia and a continuing commitment to central tenets of the maritime militarism that had cohered in the 1890s did not exhaust the navy's engagement with failure and disappointment. The navy's response also included processes of professional learning and adaptation, which are mostly missing in Rojek's analysis. It is perhaps due to the same limitation, of not paying enough attention to the arcana of expert discourse and professional work, that Rojek does not offer any new insight on the big questions that one might expect to be central to an inquiry into the navy's handling of expectations and disappointments: »Versunkene Hoffnungen« does not help the reader to understand in new ways the sources of the navy's senses of urgency in establishing Germany's global power and subsequent full-blown panic over its viability that beset the service's officers in the first half of the twentieth century and lent shape to its increasingly radicalized approaches to matters of politics and strategy.



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