

# "The Influence of Sea Power upon Historiography": The German Case of Interaction between Naval Strategy and Naval History 1890–1945

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## **Kleio and Poseidon**

My paper is an attempt to outline the importance of historical argumentation for naval policy and strategy in a more comprehensive and historiographical way than previously done. Germany will be used as an object and case study to outline starting points for further study to strengthen my planned doctoral thesis. In it I am going to study German historiography about naval affairs in the beginning of the century. The German case acts as a base for comparison with other European countries. This is also an attempt to use the form of a paper to present some ideas in a more freely manner than in a scholarly article: every idea presented is not backed up with proper footnotes, as the innovative idea is considered here, in a work-in-progress to be more important than the actual handicraft.

First of all I must throw light on the topic of this paper. What is an "interaction between historiography and naval policy"? Such a notion might surprise us. This astonishment follows, I believe, from our everyday understanding of history as a one-way narration or explanation or understanding or whatever, which leads from the past to the present. History itself or to be more precise, historiography, is not very often regarded as a reason for something that has happened. Obvious exceptions are disciplines like the history of ideas: certain historical narrations or works of historiography have had a great impact, e.g. in the process of nation building.

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Another reason for our astonishment could be, that the idea of changing interpretations in historiography is a commonplace: interpretation change according to political and economical changes in the surrounding society. When naval policy changes, historiography dealing with maritime history does change also. A German Historian Martin Raschke has pointed this causality out in his study on the German military history before the First World War dealing with the campaigns of Frederick the Great.<sup>1</sup> But what about vice versa? Does naval policy change if historical interpretations change? If so, is the cause to be searched in the realm of historiography or in the surrounding society?

The paper's time span includes a phenomenon that often has been called as the era of navalism. During navalism the size of the navy of a country was considered to be of uttermost importance. This development gained momentum towards the end of the 19th century and reached its peak in the decade before the First World War. A good example of the importance of warships (imaginary or real) was the Anglo-German naval rivalry, the so-called naval race. It deteriorated not only German finances but also the diplomatic relations between these two countries in the eve of the First World War. Maritime ambitions of countries formerly counted for "continental" states (e.g. Austria-Hungary and Germany) underline the point.

History gained a unique position in the argumentation for the navies. Not only history was used as a theatre to manifest the importance of sea-power. Captain Alfred T. Mahan's seminal study *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* was a historical study of the 17th and 18th century.<sup>2</sup> History was also a source of examples, which could be used in the debate over the future naval policy and naval estimates. As we will notice in our German case study, most of the German *Flottenprofessoren*, i.e. academics, which rallied in favour of strong fleet, were historians and economists.<sup>3</sup> Keeping these both aspects in mind, one is astonished by the fact that history itself has been neglected as a factor in the period of navalism. To take a couple of examples: Michael Hanke deals with Mahan's relationship with history on only eight of the 400

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<sup>1</sup> Raschke 1993. According to Raschke, the German General Staffs ideas of the future war were reflected on the military history written.

<sup>2</sup> Mahan 1890/1965.

<sup>3</sup> Marienfeld 1957: 110–115.

pages of Hanke's thesis on Mahan's work. Barry Gough's article concentrates in Mahan's direct literary sources without noticing – excluding social Darwinism – wider aspects of the history of ideas<sup>4</sup>.

### **Germany's struggle for seapower**

We will now proceed to our "case", to the German navy. As we concluded in the beginning, we can well understand, that the historiography dealing with German naval history changed according to the changes in the society and naval policy. It did so, but less than one could imagine. The historical interpretations were moreover something that tried to block the development and constantly return to the past – or to the past the historians and naval officers imagined. This peculiar feature began after the First World War as Germany lost its maritime strength and its navy in the articles of the Treaty of Versailles. To understand its background, we have to make some observations on the history of German naval power.

To extract all the huge amount of studies written on German naval history of the last 100 years<sup>5</sup> into few sentences is difficult. One could say that Germany fell behind other great maritime powers towards the end of the century and started an ambitious naval programme in 1898. This led to a naval rivalry with Britain and — ultimately — to the first World War. To be more precise, the shift in Germany's naval policy, which led to the naval bill of 1898 started as Wilhelm II became emperor of the unified German *Reich* in 1890. Wilhelm II was a naval enthusiast, and he found support for his naval ambitions in Germany's industry and trade. Both were blooming and asking for better protection and support in the imperialistic era. The answer was a blue water navy principle propagated by rear-admiral Tirpitz.

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<sup>4</sup> Hanke 1974: 82–90; Gough 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Even a short bibliographical summary would break the limits of this paper, as one can easily understand while reading Keith Bird's bibliography on German Naval History (Bird 1985). The works of Eckart Kehr (1930) and Volker Berghahn (1971) count as the classics in domestic politics oriented explanation of the German naval programme of 1898. Herwig's *Luxury Fleet* (1980) is a good starting point for English readers, and the studies of Epkenhans (1991) and Uhle-Wettler (1998) offer a picture of more recent publications.

The above mentioned story of Germanys path to a naval power is a standard one. It is challenged by Lawrence Sondhaus study *Preparing for Weltpolitik*.<sup>6</sup> Sondhaus underlines the fact, that we ought to search the reasons for the German naval expansion not merely from the factors of the end of the century, but to see in it a long process. It starts much earlier in the middle of the century and culminates in 1898 as the necessary majority in the *Reichstag* was present. This is indeed a very important and fruitful interpretation. It offers a new horizon to the endless debate of whether Germanys naval programme of 1898 ought to be explained by domestic factors or factors of the foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> It also offers a possibility to try to search the reasons of navalism from a different direction than before.

This paper is not the place to develop this argument further, but it is tempting to consider navalism a process much more linked to the history of ideas as thought previously. Certainly it was not only the economical factors, which lifted the man-of-war to its peak of importance before the First World War. The scale and impact of navalism can fully be explained when it is considered as an "ism", i.e. an ideology. Donald Duck in his sailor's outfit is a living example of the naval fashion of the period of navalism. I would guess, that the birth of navalism, the belief of the importance of sea-power is linked with the rise of modernism, economic development and as a part of modernisation: the emergence of historical thought. It's hard to believe that it is a mere accident that Hegel stated the importance of sea in the development of a nation in his Lectures of the philosophy of history<sup>8</sup>. It would be a fruitful study yet not undertaken by me or as far as I know by anybody else to try to track the beginnings of navalism in the thinking of the 1800's.

Whether a novelty or not, German naval power started to form as Wilhelm II named Tirpitz in 1897 to the post of the *Staatssekretär des Reichsmarineamtes*, a de facto naval minister in charge of the naval plans. Tirpitz was the mastermind behind the naval bills of 1898 and 1900, in which Germanys parliament was bound to grant money for the building of 61 battleships and battlecruisers, replaced automatically when old.

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<sup>6</sup> Sondhaus 1997.

<sup>7</sup> I have tried to present the changing interpretations of the question in German historiography in my master's thesis, see Suvioja 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Hegel 1920: 182–189. Compare with the remark of admiral von Trotha: "So begeht der von vornherein einen grundlegenden Fehler, der es unterläßt, die See und ihren Einfluß in die Geschichtsbilder eines Volkes einzufügen" (Trotha 1934: 5). Note the mahanian vocabulary of "Einfluß in die Geschichtsbilder".

Tirpitz' aim was to use the German navy as a 'risk fleet', *Risikoflotte*. Britain could not risk war against Germany's 61 capital ships, and she would so be forced to make concessions, e.g. in the question of colonies, to Germany. This risk was nullified by a number of reasons, of which the so-called distant blockade and the entente were the most important. The distant blockade put the risk of attack to the hands of the Germans. It was a greater risk than ever imagined by Tirpitz, because he did not calculate the risk from the combined fleets of France, Britain and Russia.

Not only did the risk fleet not prevent the war, it most certainly was at least one reason for the outbreak of the war. Even worse, the high seas fleet did not bring the hoped victory — it brought the naval mutiny and November revolution of 1918. Its ships were interned and later scuttled in Scapa Flow. In the treaty of Versailles Germany was allowed to keep a tiny fleet of obsolete warships. Rather than to confine itself to being a small navy, the German navy and many retired officers did everything they could to restore the *status quo ante*. In spectacular secret operations<sup>9</sup> Germany developed the forbidden weapons<sup>10</sup>, but at least as important as the technical development was the ideological. The guilt of the revolution of 1918 had to be removed from the navy's popular image and the politicians' minds. Not only had the navy to be presented innocent to the war and defeat, the naval policy of the imperial Germany based on battleships had to be shown to be a correct one in order to win support for the reconstruction of the battle fleet. That this was in a way achieved as the navy got Hitler's support and later on the most favoured status in the armaments' plans, seems to be a not very small wonder. The wonder did not last very long after the outbreak of the Second World War. In the end Germany's navy was defeated for the second time for mainly the same reasons: inferiority in numbers, geographical position and insufficient resources.

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<sup>9</sup> To give a hint of how bizarre the things could get: in the so called Lohmann-scandal, where some of these activities were disclosed, the navy was found to own 75 % of the Berliner Bacon AG – a porkmeat producer *zur See!* See Dülffer 1973: 92. Dülffer's study is the major work of the navy in the years 1920–1939.

<sup>10</sup> Newly the German actions in Finland in developing submarines were studied in an accurate and thorough work of Annette and Björn Forsén, see Forsén & Forsén 1999.

### **Historiography in the service of naval policy**

To return to our original question, what did historiography have to do with all of this? Interpretations in naval history, both popular and scientific, were used as arguments for the navy's sake. They also delivered material for the officers themselves to plan the navy's future. The interaction of the navy and historiography can roughly be divided into four phases: a) naval history in support of Wilhelm II's and Tirpitz' blue water naval strategy (1890-1914), b) the "wieder wagen" – or "dare it once more" – ideology in the 1920's, c) naval history in defence of the navy's status in the 1930's and finally d) history as defence for criticism during the Second World War. These phases ought to be thought of as classification tools, not as strict divisions. They are not sharply divided and many aspects of them overlap.

It should also be noted here, that I am by far not the first to notice the link between the German navy and its history. On the contrary, there exists a strong tradition to study the 'historical self-interpretation' and historical continuities in the history of the German navy. However those studies normally confine to look only the one side of the interaction: the use of history for the navy's sake. In this line of thought works of naval history are seen more or less as propaganda and often the reasons behind the argumentation in those works are not studied carefully enough. The purpose of my thesis is to do precisely this and to compare the German situation with that in the other naval powers of the First World War.

### **How to construct a glorious maritime past?**

There existed very little of naval history in Germany before the 1890's. The naval warfare of the unification wars against Denmark and France was, e.g. dealt as chapters in the official histories of the army. Historical arguments about the navy, however, existed. In 1848 this manifested itself as naval enthusiasm in the National Assembly of Frankfurt. It is curious that the arguments used in the parliamentary debate in Frankfurt (e.g. the defence of maritime commerce) were restated in Germany in the 1890's. Here, in Finland they were heard in the parliament as late as in the 1920's!

In the first phase historical arguments were used to mobilise the decision makers and voters to approve the Tirpitzian plan of the risk fleet and the naval bill. Germany entered this era of navalism relatively late. Lacking a glorious maritime past like Great Britain, Germany was forced to mobilise every possibility of historical argumentation for a greater German navy. The problem the Germans ran into was, and this is something that followed them until 1914 and also later on, was the lack of maritime past. This meant that every skirmish in Africa between the navy and the local rebels had to be counted for a naval action in order to have a naval tradition in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Austria-Hungary was luckier since it could at least rely on the naval actions of admiral Tegetthoff<sup>12</sup>.

The small naval force of the Frankfurter Bundesmarine of 1848–1853 could not do, because it was liberal and democratic in its tradition, not Prussian. As Prussia was viewed as the founder of the unified Germany, its navy had to bear the burden of German naval tradition. There emerged a hagiography of Prussian-German naval tradition. In it the Bundesmarine of Frankfurt had a tiny role. The line of ancestors went from the Vikings through the German Hansa league to the naval ambitions of the Great Elector and Frederick the Great until Prussia with Prince Adalbert took the lead.<sup>13</sup>

History became crucial for the navy first after Wilhelm II tried to strengthen the German navy from 1890 onwards. The subject of history became a central source of arguments for a greater German navy. Many of the Flottenprofessoren, "fleet professors", mentioned earlier on, were historians e.g. Erich Marcs and Max Weber. University professors also hold lectures and chairs for maritime affairs were founded. All this enthusiasm produced only few publications for the simple reason that there was very little of subject matter.

This state of affairs was to be changed with the outbreak of the First World War. Right from the start of the war, naval actions were carefully followed in popular publications.<sup>14</sup> Their tone however was shifted more to a defence of the navy's status as a fleet-in-being. Publications had to show, that the navy fought although

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis 1969: 4.

<sup>12</sup> Sondhaus 1997,

<sup>13</sup> See as a good example Reventlow 1901/1999: 1–61. The persistence of this tradition can be found out by comparing Reventlow's presentation to a work published nearly three decades later, see Mantey 1926: 5–32. von Trotha delivers a straightforward national socialist version in Trotha 1934: 8–13.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Mittler 1915.

it spent most of the time in its bases in the North Sea. Thus the second phase in naval historiography started already during the war.

The navy also quickly took control of its historiography by founding a naval history section in the navy's general staff (*Admiralstab*). The new office was called *Kriegswissenschaftliche Abteilung*, Section of Scientific War Studies. This illustrates well the navy's tendency to think of its own work in naval history as "scientific" and neutral, a tendency that continues right until 1945.<sup>15</sup> The aim of the new office was to collect war diaries and other source material in order to be able to write a navy's own history of the war independent of the army's intentions. This made possible to keep a naval archive independent from the *Reichsarchiv* in the post-war years<sup>16</sup>.

### **Historia docet! The navy's struggle for survival in historiography**

In the second phase the status and fate of the German High Seas Fleet in the First World War created a burden of history for the future fleet, influencing its construction, planning and operations. A German historian Knut Stang even argued in his dissertation *Das zerschlagene Schiff*<sup>17</sup>, that the warships Germany build in the interwar period, were built to restore the navy's former position as the elite of the imperial Germany. The ships themselves did not have any rational grounds. Stang is overstating the case, but there is a great deal of truth in his interpretation. To have a great fleet, many ships and a lion's share of the armament resources was the sake, *die Sache*, for which everything had to be done - even if it was in contradiction with Germany's overall interests. It is important to notice that for the officers of the navy there

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<sup>15</sup> This mentality went as far as creating a cleft between the naval history section and the *as Deutsches Seegeltungswerk* renamed German Naval League, which was inclined towards national socialism. Admiral Schuster, head of the section, wrote: "We don't want to make any propaganda, since we are not a 'Seegeltungswerk', but the Section of Scientific War Studies" (Admiral Schuster to captain ret. Wilhelm Widenmann 19.8.1944, N 158, 23, 111, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, here: BA-MA). Schuster even blamed the German historian Johannes Haller: "How doctrine-oriented! Those policy-making historians!" (Schuster's remarks on professor Zechlin's summary "German Historians on the Naval question" N 158, 19, 101, BA-MA)

<sup>16</sup> I have outlined the road to the official naval history, the *Admiralstabswerk*, in my article *Merimiehen haudalla laulaa Kleio*, Suviola 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Stang 1992.

could not be a Germany's interest, which would not be also its navy's. This was a central aspect of the heritage of the imperial German navy<sup>18</sup>.

The naval historiography in the inter-war period had different aims. First of all it sought to fight the opinion, that the tirpitzian naval policy was a mistake. Tirpitz and the naval bill were defended in numerous publications ranging from popular pamphlets to scholarly works. This task was filled, above all, by retired naval officers. German academic discipline took the subject relatively late, during the end of the decade. Academic historians needed published material, and could not start before source books like the German *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette* were published.

The navy itself was more fortunate, since it had its own archive. The Section of War Studies went on with its old project, and managed to get the first volume of the official of the naval war ready for printing as early as 1919. The official history *Der Krieg zur See 1914–1918*<sup>19</sup> had another aim: it presented the achievements of the navy during the war. This teaching was needed, since the public opinion was aware of the army's gallant but desperate fight, but it did not appreciate the navy's status as a fleet-in-being. An endless number of popular publications followed the official history.

The third aim was to rinse the navy's shield from the humiliation of the naval mutiny of 1918. For this purpose a naval version of the *Dolchstoßlegende*<sup>20</sup> was created. *Dolchstoßlegende* or stab-in-the-back-theory of the conservative historians and politicians blamed the independent socialists for the revolution and defeat in the war. According this view the army's situation was not desperate and the situation hopeless before the uprising. The naval part of this simply stated that the mutiny in the navy was a consequence of a well-planned socialist propaganda in the navy. The naval version of the *Dolchstoßlegende* not only saved

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<sup>18</sup> Guntram Schulze-Wegener shows that this mentality didn't start to change until 1943 and even then the old attitudes persisted, Schulze-Wegener 1997, passim.

<sup>19</sup> On the *Krieg zur See*, see Suvioja 2000: 68–70.

<sup>20</sup> I'm indebted to Mathias Fechner for this brilliant term. As far as I know, he first used it in his article over German post-war fiction, see Fechner 1997.

the individual officers from criticism and guilt to the defeat. Moreover it supported the atmosphere of the dare-it-once-more: without socialist propaganda the German navy could have a chance.

The number of publications over the German naval war and tipitzian naval policy decrease towards the 1930's. The beginning of the national socialist rule wasn't followed by a wave of publications. This has, I think, above all two explanations. First of all a consistent interpretation was reached at the end of the 1920's. The naval subject was dealt in the academic historiography as a part of the campaign against the accusations of the German war-quilt. There was no need for further comprehensive studies. Only smaller details needed to be studied. New, critical interpretations written by Eckart Kehr and Wolfgang Wegener<sup>21</sup> were not discussed publicly; they were moreover ignored.

The second reason for the low profile of the German naval historiography in the national socialist period was, that Germany had every reason to avoid any disagreement with Britain. Germany wanted to get the restrictions of the treaty of Versailles lifted. As the Imperial German navy at least in the British interpretation created a threat to Britain, there was no point in risking a possible Anglo-German naval agreement with large-scale publications of the wilhelmine fleet.

This interpretation has an obvious difficulty: how do these reasons influence the choice of subject of the individual writers? Before I can answer this question, I would suggest, that some can be said from the negation: there was not a wave of publications of naval history after Hitler came to power in 1933. Also the naval propaganda did not reach the intensity of the pre-war years, and it was kept in the control of the national socialist regime.

### **How to make a naval leader out of a Bavarian infantryman?**

The last two phases overlap and have much in common. Historical arguments were needed to assure Hitler from the importance of seapower and to be more precise, from the importance of a strong battle-fleet. In

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<sup>21</sup> Kehr 1930, Wegener 1929.

the naval historiography this aim was striven by two means. First of all, naval history offered examples for the argumentation in favour of the navy. Secondly, naval history was a mean to form a specific image of the new navy of the national socialist Germany, the Kriegsmarine. In fact, the history of the Kriegsmarine formed a central part of the historical publications. The role of the navy in the fight against the Treaty of Versailles was also underlined. This struggle provided another "example" of the benefits of a navy for the national socialists.

It is a remarkably story how the navy was able to persuaded Hitler to see the value of the navy. Hitler was at first very sceptical about the worth of a navy, but adopted little by little the mahanian concept of the battle-fleet, which was presented by the high command of the navy.<sup>22</sup> In the end the navy got even a favoured status in the distribution of the armament resources in 1939. This allocation came late, however, and in the Second World War the German navy was hopelessly outnumbered. There simply was not enough time to create a new navy from the restricted Reichsmarine. Many ships and designs were inferior, which quickly raised strong criticism among the officers. And again history was called to help by the high command of the navy. Various projects were started to study the navy's armament policy from the 1920s onwards. Such studies were meant as an answer to the younger officers criticising inferior designs or missing ship types.

### **Pleas for the High Court of History**

This attitude of defence was used also against the overall command and Hitler as the navy lost its favoured position in the armament plans after the outbreak of the Second World War. The defence stiffened as the maritime situation deteriorated and the navy fell more and more into opposition. Hitler had placed great hopes in the navy and he was disappointed for its efforts, which resembled more and more the stalemate of the hopeless naval war 1914–18. It's symptomatic that the answer of the navy against these accusations was historiography.

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<sup>22</sup> The navy's and its officers conservative attitude together with the navy's loyal activity surely helped in it. For this process, see Dülffer 1973, *passim*, and Bird 1977: 278–297 and Stang 1995: 322–347. Stang is puzzled by this development to a such degree, that he even plays with the idea to explain it by a psychoanalytic model. In it Reader would represent a figure of the missing father for Hitler.

As it became obvious that Germany had lost for the second time a naval war against Britain, a project was started to write the history of the German Imperial Navy in the years 1871–1914. This part was missing from the official history *Krieg zur See*. The reasons for this were, I think, the same than for the diminishing interest for the history of the imperial navy mentioned earlier. The actual naval war, the heroic deeds of the navy had first to be displayed. The pre-war naval policy was a dangerous subject for the navy, because it was so crucial. If the wilhelmine naval policy was found to be false, all the plans of the navy to rebuilt a tirpitzian battle-fleet would lose rational grounds. During the years of the Weimar republic this possibility had to hidden from the parliament and later on from Hitler.

However as the U-boat campaign came to an end and the large ships were one by one destroyed, there was little to lose. At the same time many of even the younger imperial naval officers were retired and could be used to study history. The project of the history of the imperial navy, first planned as a 500-page monograph, grew to a project with some 30 topics and 20 officers. Even a Finnish rear-admiral who had escaped to Germany after the Finnish armistice was recruited to study Russian naval policy.

As one reads the wartime papers of the Section of the War Studies, especially those from the last month of the war, one cannot escape the idea, that the real, unconscious aim was to preserve the navy's honour for a future rebuilding. It may be, that the imperial officers had the aftermath of the First World War in mind. They saw in history and in the archives of the navy the only means to make it possible to rebuild the navy after the most probable defeat.<sup>23</sup> Personal motives may have played a central role also. It was very rational for retired naval officers, especially admirals to join the Section located in the secure and remote Tambach in order to escape the air terror. It is all too human to escape to the pleasant prospects of the wilhelmine navy in the hour of the total humiliation of the Kriegsmarine.

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<sup>23</sup> Curious enough this kind of a defence of the navy with history took a new shape after the war and went on at least until the 1960's. As late as 1952 some high-ranging retired naval officers thought of ruining professor Walter Hubatsch' reputation at the University of Göttingen after Hubatsch had criticised the wilhelmine naval policy! (Widenmann to vice-admiral ret. Friedrich Lützow 10.10.1952, N 158, 22 page 42, BA-MA).

At the same time the division between the older, history-inclined officers, which often had served in the Imperial navy, and the younger front officers led by C-in-C admiral Dönitz became complete. Dönitz could use some of the historical examples tactically to drive the navy's sake. Strategically, however Dönitz wasn't inclined to try to change the overall strategy with historical arguments of the wilhelmine Germany. He was moreover at least inclined to see Germany's interests as a totality and not as a sheer struggle of interest between the navy and some other organisations like the air force.<sup>24</sup> Towards the end of the war the reintroduction of the Tirpitzian naval policy, which the imperial naval officers had tried for over two decades was also impossible.

## Conclusion

Lacking a long maritime tradition, the German navy developed a unique historical awareness. Naval history was constantly needed to deliver examples used as arguments in the debates for the enlargement or sheer survival of the navy. This task was difficult before the First World War, since there was little German maritime history to write. After the First World War the navy got a subject for its history, the naval war. But together with it came the difficulties: the obvious bankruptcy of the wilhelmine naval policy, the inability of the navy to break to naval blockade, the lack of a decisive naval victory and - above all - the naval mutiny and the November revolution. The way the officers and other historians tried to cope with these difficulties tell us much about the nature and social reality behind historiography. Historiography constructs historical reality, and it is for that reason a struggle of competing interpretations. German naval history had very few of competitors, but even the fear of such led to the constant shadow boxing we now read from the official or semi-official histories. But to put it all together under the label of "propaganda" misses much of its importance for the history of ideas or the understanding of the German naval history. Many aspects of the mentality of the German naval officers were not unique, nor were the interpretations of naval history if compared with other European countries.

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<sup>24</sup> This change in the navy is one of the central themes in Schulze-Wegener 1997. It is interesting to follow how difficult it was.

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