

Military History, Militarization, and the “American Century”

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The blossoming of military history in Germany offers the chance to set new agendas beyond conventional narratives. The notion of a distinct authoritarian Prusso-German militarism, set against political modernity and civil society, has long served as the master narrative of modern German military history. But this narrative no longer holds any promise. It fails to situate the German experience within a common European and transatlantic military political realm and war culture; it ignores the centrality of technocratic reasoning and industrialized warfare for any understanding of the German military; it offers too overblown and simplistic a portrayal of societal militarization; and it downplays militarist multiplicities and the transformations of the early 20th century. This narrative has the additional disadvantage of cutting off the history of the military and war after 1945 from what came previously.¹

Some historians have recently proffered the concept of “total war” as another master narrative of modern military history. But the shortcomings of the narrative of “total war” are only too evident as well, and not simply because historians are unable to agree on the exact criteria that define a war as “total”. This is a teleological narrative of history, with the dubious premise that war only realizes itself fully in all-consuming “total war”, which elides the varieties and ambiguities of war pursuits in the past two centuries and conflates “total war” with modern warfare in general. The narrative also fails to recognize the ever-present and protean boundaries of warfare and war mobilization that in shifting and often asymmetrical ways have circumscribed their intensity and extension; even World Wars I and II never attained the kind of totality for the participating states, societies, and peoples that the concept implies.²

¹ Michael Geyer, The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945, in: John R. Gillis (ed.), *The Militarization of the Western World*, New Brunswick 1989, pp. 65-102; Thomas Kühne/Benjamin Ziemann, Militärgeschichte in der Erweiterung: Konjunkturen, Interpretationen, Konzepte, in: idem (eds.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, Paderborn 2000, pp. 9-46; Benjamin Ziemann, Sozialmilitarismus und militärische Sozialisation im deutschen Kaiserreich 1870–1914. Ergebnisse und Desiderate in der Revision eines Geschichtsbildes, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 53 (2002), pp. 148-164; Charles S. Maier, German War, German Peace, in: Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *German History Since 1800*, London 1997, pp. 539-555; Dirk Bönker, *Militarizing the Western World: Navalism, Empire, and State-Building in Germany and the United States before World War I*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University 2002.

Military historians are well-advised to historicize the ideas of a Prusso-German militarism and of total war as political concepts that reflected the ideology of their fashioners rather than benefit scholarly analysis. Such a move involves deciphering these two ideas as discursive attempts to cope with, and define political agendas in the face of, not only experiences of war, arms build-ups, or military intervention in domestic affairs but the militarization of Europe and the United States in general.³ In highly charged, multiple, and uneven ways, this process has turned the pursuit of military force into one organizing center of diplomacy, state-formation, social relations, the economy and identity politics. It is this contested and open-ended process of militarization itself that is central to the modern military history of the Western world. The goal of exploring this process cannot be to produce a totalizing master narrative, but to reframe our understanding of recent history, to cut across the ruptures of the past 100 years, and to relate the convoluted history of military force, strategy, and institutions to general history.⁴

Scholarship on the U.S. in the “American century” bears out the promise of an exploration of 20th century militarization.⁵ That century, which was ushered in with World War II, brought to the U.S. full-scale and continuous albeit non-linear militarization. So extensive were its scale and scope that even the U.S. power elite voiced concerns about its ramifications while masterminding this process and creating the postwar national security state. These concerns articulated themselves most prominently in imagery of a “garrison state” and of a “military-industrial complex” which, in turn, has left its mark on scholarly and popular writings.⁶

American historians have begun to analyze the process of militarization in the U.S. in an exemplary fashion. Most directly, this process has been explored on the levels of national policy-making and institution-building. Many historical works deal with military strategy and foreign policy developed under a newly emerging ideology of national security.⁷ Historians have also examined the making of the national security state, which grounded the continually

² Hew Strachan, On Total War and Modern War, in: *International History Review* 22 (2000), pp. 341-370; Roger Chickering, The Use and Abuse of a Concept, in: Manfred F. Boemeke/Roger Chickering/Stig Förster (eds.), *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, Washington 1999, pp. 13-28.

³ Michael Geyer, Militarism and Capitalism in the 20th Century, in: Nils Petter Gleditsch/Olav Njolstadt (eds.), *Arms Races: Technological and Political Dynamics*, Oslo 1990, pp. 247-275; idem, *Militarization of Europe* (fn. 1).

⁴ John R. Gillis (ed.), *The Militarization of the Western World*, New Brunswick 1989.

⁵ For the notion of an “American Century” see Michael Hogan (ed.), *The ambiguous legacy: U.S. foreign relations in the “American century”*, Cambridge 1999.

⁶ Harold Lasswell, *Essays on the Garrison State*, ed. Jan Stanley, New Brunswick 1997; Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America’s Anti-Statism and its Cold War Grand Strategy*, Princeton 2000; Alex Roland, *The Military-Industrial Complex*, Washington 2001.

evolving institutional nexus between the armed forces, the national security bureaucracy, Congress, the defence industry, organized science, and, increasingly, think tanks.⁸ Moreover, much work has been done on the political economy of militarization, exploring the reorganisation of the national economy, as exemplified by the rise of the new "gunbelt", the defence-related new high-tech industrial complexes in the West, the South, and along the Northern Atlantic seaboard.⁹ A growing number of works focuses on the ways in which postwar militarization revamped the national scientific establishment, shaping its institutional expansion and redirecting its knowledge production.¹⁰

Many of the findings resulting from this research were incorporated in Michael Sherry's "In the Shadow of War", a history of the U.S. since the 1930s published in 1995.¹¹ In this book, Sherry offers a magisterial account of the dynamics and consequences of U.S. militarization and moves what he calls the "large and sustained focus of anxieties and resources on military power" to the center of U.S. history in the "American Century". His multidimensional account of militarization transcends the examination of national policy-making and institution-building. Drawing on a wide range of literature on Cold War culture, sexual politics, and social movements, this book also explores the social and cultural history of militarization and emphasizes language, culture, and identity as the fulcrum of militarization.

Sherry casts "war and national security" as "consuming anxieties" capable of providing the "memories, models, and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life". Thus, until the mid-1960s, the language of national security provided a key discursive framework that helped to bound reform agendas. The Civil Rights movements, for example, linked the cause of legal and social equality to the imperatives of militarized competition with the Soviet Union, after the experience of wartime mobilization had already rearranged relations of class, race, and gender during World War II.¹² An amorphous language of

⁷ For this framework of national security see Melvyn P. Leffler, National Security, in: *Journal of American History* 77 (1990), S. 143-152; idem, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Stanford 1992.

⁸ A monumental study is Michael Hogan, *A cross of iron: Harry S. Truman and the origins of the national security state*, Cambridge 1998; a concise summary is Charles E. Neu, The Rise of the National Security Bureaucracy, in: Louis Galambos (ed.), *The New American State: Bureaucracies and Policies Since World War II*, Baltimore 1987, pp. 85-108.

⁹ Ann Markusen et al., *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America*, New York 1991; Robert W. Lotchin, *Fortress California 1910-1961: From Warfare to Welfare*, New York 1992.

¹⁰ A fine example is Stuart W. Leslie, *The Cold War and American Science: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford*, New York 1993.

¹¹ Michael Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States Since the 1930s*, New Haven 1995, the following quotes: p. 11, p. xi.

¹² The key analysis now is Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Rights: Race and the Image of Democracy*, Princeton 2000.

war also gradually pervaded public rhetoric and the semantics of some policy initiatives (e.g. the War on Poverty). Moreover, anxieties over the atom bomb moved to the core of both elite and popular postwar American culture.¹³ Languages and images of sexuality intersected with the concerns and semantics of national security in the Cold War era. The former became imbricated in efforts to fix normative regimes of gender that sought to define proper notions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity while demonizing homosexuality and “unrestrained” female sexuality.¹⁴ Evidently, Sherry’s synthesis is by no means exhaustive. It operates on the macro-level, focusing on the national state, national political culture, and national economy.

By contrast, books by Catherine Lutz and Laura McEnaney relate structures of militarization to everyday experience and culture. Lutz’s local history of militarization on the American homefront explores the ever-changing ways in which the lives and experiences of residents of Fayetteville, North Carolina, were affected by the adjacent military base of Fort Bragg, which civic boosters secured for their town in 1918.¹⁵ This is a study of a city marked by the visible presence of the military, ranging from intrusive military exercises, which made the surrealism of simulated war a fact of daily life, to the private pursuits of soldiers and their families, and the local manifestations of the “spectator-sports militarism” of recent years.¹⁶ In Lutz’s account, the process of becoming a military city exacerbated and transformed existing social and political divisions and inequalities and created new ones. The struggles over civil rights and Jim Crow, which acquired saliency by the presence of African-American soldiers on the base, were the most prominent example. Social tensions surrounding the Vietnam War also left a mark on communal life, as Fort Bragg served as a main site from which the army deployed troops to Vietnam.

Home front militarization is also the theme of Laura McEnaney’s book on the meanings and practices of civil defence during the 1950s and how its terms were negotiated between policy-makers and citizens.¹⁷ Civil defence emerged as a highly contested proposition of military preparedness that required direct popular involvement and the militarization of civilian homes. The casting of civil defence into a family-centered, grass-roots enterprise was highly ideological, argues McEnaney, for it reflected the languages and institutions of

¹³ A classic study is Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, New York 1985.

¹⁴ Groundbreaking were Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York 1988, and her article: Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb, in: Lary May (ed.), *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, Chicago 1989, pp. 154-170.

¹⁵ Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*, Boston 2001.

¹⁶ For this term see Michael Mann, The Roots and Contradictions of Modern Militarism, in: *New Left Review* 162 (1987), pp. 35-50.

¹⁷ Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defence Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties*, Princeton 2000.

idealized post-war domesticity and was built around an explicit contrast to statist Communist collectivism. Her book demonstrates the involvement of civic groups and ordinary citizens in civil defence efforts. Activists from women's clubs, organized labor, and civil rights organisations like the NAACP took part in debates over civil defence and strove to infuse their own ethics and agendas. Most American citizens ultimately did not respond favorably to the call for household militarization and overall preparedness.

The historian Michael Geyer defines "Pax Americana" as a "militarist social formation" in its entirety, a formation whose "maintenance and reproduction" depended on the "preparation and propagation" of war.¹⁸ The works of Sherry, McEnaney, Lutz and others suggest a somewhat different picture. They all evoke the unevenness of militarization and its constantly changing boundaries. Militarization never was a "totalizing, single-minded project", claims Sherry.¹⁹ It was only one organizing center of American life. The national security state never became the only linchpin of federal government and policies; the same applies to the "gun-belt" in relation to the U.S. economy. The extraction of resources by the national security state and its directive powers over corporate America remained limited. The experiences of urban communities cannot all be equated with those of the military city of Fayetteville. The materialist pursuit of happiness and the rise of consumer culture consistently circumscribed the appeal of militarized identities. The drive for civil defence ultimately failed as most citizens did not show much interest and refused to bear the burden of privatized shelter protection. The appropriation of the language of national security by civic activists and social reformers was clearly not a recipe for success in the pursuit of their agendas. Moreover, the landscape of militarization has never been static or progressed in one direction, for its shapes and degrees have changed dramatically over time.

While avoiding linear and totalizing accounts, these works on the militarization in the "American century" have succeeded in positioning it as an organizing theme of American modernity. Bringing this work into dialogue with work done on European militarization promises great rewards; as would attempts to use it as a building block of larger accounts of the militarization of Europe and the U.S. as an inter- and transnational process spanning the entire 20th century.

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¹⁸ Geyer, *Militarization of Europe* (fn. 1), p. 80, p. 187 fn. 40.

¹⁹ Sherry, *In the Shadow of War* (fn. 11), p. xi.