

Wilson, Peter H. *Iron and Blood, A Military History of the German Speaking Peoples since 1500*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023. xlix + 754 pages. Hardcover: \$39.95.

Oxford professor Peter Wilson seeks to correct misconceptions that “recycle well-worn interpretations” about post-1500 German military history. Preoccupied with the later nineteenth century and the two world wars, they foster the myth of a “specifically 'German' way of war” caused by the country's geopolitical realities. This “almost unshakable orthodoxy” holds that to acquire essential living space, German officers, surrounded and outnumbered, sought an unfettered and technologically superior military capable of “*Blitzkriege*” (xliii.)

Wilson wants to show that, though containing distinctive features, the military history of the German-speaking peoples has much to do with their origins in the regionalized Holy Roman Empire and is very similar to the rest of Europe and the world. He finds that though militarism was a key factor in the conduct of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland's foreign policy, their political and war-making systems were decentralized “far longer than most other European countries.” He believes that the autonomy of warlords or “*Kriegsherren*,” not centralization, “remained the primary political characteristic” prior to 1914, and after 1945 in an updated form of federalism. Wilson maintains that Prusso-German methods after 1871 failed to exercise proper “utility of force to achieve political goals;” their obsession for quick victories left them rudderless when confronted with gains or losses. He rejects claims that Germans possess a unique ‘genius for war’ that originates from any connection to 'blood and soil' (xlvi-xlviii, 751.)

This work attempts to reveal how previous historians have inverted the ways nineteenth-century German nationalists “celebrated” the concept of 'blood and soil.’ Depending on their goals, they portray Prussia's officer class as ruthless, but either “subservient or independently minded,” and in command of a detached soldiery whose “martial ethos” somehow distorted the

values of German society. Wilson finds that German scholars have mostly moved beyond the old approach, but “it remains deeply embedded in anglophone works” (xliv-xlvi.) This exhaustive study has five parts, each covering a century, and is divided into three chapters which focus on how political, social, and economic configurations relate to military organization in peace and war.

The author sees Frederick the Great's victories, along with the complete nature of German success from 1864 to 1871 against the Danes, Austrians, and French, as fostering the belief that the army could attain the country's goals without political interference or the need for diplomacy. The General Staff became overconfident, conflated their professional needs with those of the nation, and came to believe that “military necessity' justified the disregard of . . . international laws and conventions.” Wilson posits that though outwardly confident, Germany's generals suffered from an “underlying anxiety that things might go wrong,” so they stressed “superior planning, organization, and morale” to win quickly and avoid a ‘people's war’ with a vengeful population. Thus, they willingly accepted grave risks while stressing operational and tactical concerns over strategic ones. (401-404)

When the Second Reich came into being, it suffered from an “unhappy division” of the aspects of “command, administration, and planning” (413). Wilhelm II was supreme warlord, who, like Holy Roman Emperors, created competing institutions to divide and manipulate army leadership. Germans better use of rapid advances in steam power, railways, and the telegraph helped them mask these inadequacies to win the Wars of Unification; but it also convinced them that a great two-front European war was inevitable and winnable—only if France was defeated swiftly. The problem with Schlieffen's plan for Wilson was that it lacked an alternative if the war dragged on, “that was simply too awful to contemplate” (404.) World War One was a “huge

gamble” for the German-led Central Powers; vastly outnumbered 118 million to 266 million in population, their strategy stood no “reasonable chance of success at all” (532.) When France did not fall in 1914, victories in the East buoyed the Germans and no attempt was made to bargain using their considerable gains of 1915-16. The author perceives the implementation of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 as Germany’s greatest mistake since it unleashed the massive power of the United States and negated any possibility of negotiating an acceptable result; especially since it was made “potentially unnecessary” by the Russian Revolution in March of that year (540-541.)

Hitler’s ascent in the 1930s is viewed as a spiritual continuation of Germany's rise to great power status. He provided the grand strategic vision found wanting in the Wilhelmine era, but his Blitzkrieg “never existed as a coherent strategy” and its early successes continued the fixation on operations/tactics (752.) The odds against Germany also remained unchanged, as did the divided and wasteful nature of German war-making. Operation Barbarossa was another great gamble launched with an over-stretched economy and without a strategic reserve; staggering Red Army losses in the millions were simply replaced (578-79.) Fanatical German efforts after 1943 produced improved weapons and more tactical victories, but the country continued to suffer from its central problem: American war production, which achieved a fifty-fold increase (744.)

Wilson laments that, in spite of this second great catastrophic defeat, the “sheer scale of Germany's conquests against significant odds” created an enduring admiration for the Wehrmacht worldwide, especially in the US military. Over 2,000 former senior German officers were recruited to assist the US Army Historical Branch in producing 2500 publications that emphasized smaller numbers and better weapons. (689, 752) Germany rearmed as part of NATO in 1955, but claims ‘civilian power’ status since it formally renounced war as a policy instrument

(613.) The author questions this assertion in light of renewed German participation in combat, “particularly in Afghanistan after 2002.” The country’s economic power allows it to spend heavily on defense; and though the end of the Cold War led to a reduction in spending, it has revived significantly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (527, 753.) Wilson questions whether Germany, which has surged to fifth in overall global arms sales, “will continue to emphasize multilateralism and a rules-based international order” or follow a more self-interested and potentially dangerous path. Germany’s greater resources allow it to project power better than its European partners through the strategic employment of economic aid, training missions and arms exports, a development he warns “that all democratically minded citizens should consider” (753-754.)

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