

[Berghahn on Russell, 'Steamship Nationalism: Ocean Liners and National Identity in Imperial Germany and the Atlantic World'](#)

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Mark A. Russell. *Steamship Nationalism: Ocean Liners and National Identity in Imperial Germany and the Atlantic World*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020. 354 pp. ISBN 978-1-03-223650-6.

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While there are innumerable studies of the war ships that the European powers built before World War I, Mark A. Russell is certainly right to claim in his introduction that commercial shipping has remained a badly under-researched though crucial field for understanding the economic, political, and cultural developments of the pre-1914 era of Europe's global expansion and imperialism as well as increased contact between the European powers and the United States across the Atlantic. After a brief discussion of some earlier work by Bernhard Rieger and Volker Plagemann, Russell argues that "the study of the merchant marine and transatlantic passenger shipping ... broadly speaking, reveals much about the nature of the German Empire in both its national and international dimensions, [as] the development of a merchant fleet, driven by capitalist innovation, was a major feature of German modernization" (p. 5). Accordingly, there are two major themes at the center of this book: "Germany's largest and most luxurious transatlantic passenger liners" and the 52,000 BRT *Imperator* in particular, supplemented by studies of other famous German, British, American, and French ocean-going giants (p. 7). The second focus is Russell's portrayal of Albert Ballin, the driving force behind the rise of the Hamburg-Amerikanische Paketfahrt-Aktien-Gesellschaft (HAPAG).

To deal with Ballin first, before I turn to the book's detailed story of HAPAG and transatlantic shipping: Russell shares the critical views of earlier biographers, such as Lamar Cecil and Frank Broeze, that the director general, though born in Hamburg, was not a model gentleman but a hard-nosed corporate manager. He was prepared to take considerable risks when he decided to build a fleet of huge ocean liners, often against the opposition of some of his colleagues. Before the beginning of the new century, he tried to reduce these risks by promoting the cartelization of the shipping industry by signing passenger quota agreements with his foreign competitors. However, when these agreements with Dutch and French lines proved unstable—as international cartels have tended to be—and when they seemed to constrain HAPAG's global reach and ambitions, Ballin unceremoniously abandoned them. Initially he also gave his domestic competitors, and the Bremen-based Norddeutscher Lloyd in particular, a hard time, but ultimately focused on his British rivals. His attitudes toward German domestic politics were even more difficult to gauge.

Hailing from a Jewish family that moved from Denmark to Hamburg, he became the target of racist anti-Semitism. But this did not prevent him from developing a sort of friendship with the otherwise rabidly anti-Semitic Kaiser Wilhelm II. He favored the latter's expansion of the Imperial Navy as

implemented by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz in a long-term, rather megalomaniac plan designed to challenge the dominant position of Britain and its Royal Navy politically and ultimately even militarily in a major battle in the North Sea. He was also a member of the blatantly imperialist Navy League. Yet, when the Tirpitz Plan ran into trouble and Britain engaged the Kaiser as the commander-in-chief in a quantitative and qualitative naval arms race (i.e., more and more battleships as well as bigger and bigger ones) Ballin, the shrewdly calculating businessman concluded that Germany was bound to lose this race and tried to persuade his Imperial friend to abandon the naval competition. As he put it in 1908, the country did not have the financial capacity to keep up or even to outbuild the much wealthier British. Russell's book appears to accurately absolve Ballin from the accusation that it was he who led Germany into a disastrous total war, but instead argues that Ballin contributed to heightened international tensions, especially with the British. When this war was unleashed by Wilhelm II against Ballin's counsel and those of other businessmen and it became clear that this world war could not be won by Germany within a few weeks, Ballin knew that his life's work had been destroyed. After the Allies finally defeated Germany in November 1918, the Kaiser's proud battle fleet was scuttled at Scapa Flow, and most merchant ships were confiscated and renamed to sail under the flags of the victors. Deeply depressed, the creator of the HAPAG shipping empire committed suicide.

Looking at his behavior and actions before 1914, it is clear that Ballin reflected and had internalized the zeitgeist of Wilhelmine Germany when it came to domestic politics and attitudes toward the rising working-class movement. Never mind the more liberal and cosmopolitan cultural climate of the Hanseatic city of Hamburg; when it came to curbing the influence of the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions, Ballin was hardly different from the autocratic coal and steel managers of the Ruhr Industrial region. At the same time, he shared their patriarchic attitudes toward the blue-collar workers in his own company that were building, maintaining, and staffing his ocean liners and numerous freighters that were operating in all parts of the world—as long as they kept away from socialist activism. Nor was he ignorant of the inhumane conditions in the unbearably hot and polluted engine rooms of his ocean liners. As Russell mentions, they were so bad that some of workers jumped overboard in despair. Later, HAPAG repeatedly had to deal with protests and strikes creating unwelcome publicity in New York when Ballin tried to lure as many wealthy American passengers as possible to book a journey on *Imperator* or other HAPAG liners.

This leads Russell to the other, more detailed analysis of his important book, which is initially still centered on socioeconomic questions before moving to the history of overseas travel, luxury accommodation, the history of interior design, and more generally cultural history, including the advertising of those supposedly unforgettable experiences of transatlantic travel and the simply overwhelming images of modern maritime technology. While large sections of *Steamship Nationalism* focus on first class and the comforts of wealthy passengers, the cost-conscious HAPAG became a major carrier of Europeans, especially from the East, who had come to Hamburg to emigrate to the United States. Other companies were more reluctant to take these families, often of Jewish background escaping Russian discrimination and pogroms, because of the challenge they posed to securing a livable space down below on the fourth-class decks as well as tolerable hygienic standards. With many British lines refusing to take such passengers, it was these groups that HAPAG liners put in steerage cabins of up to eight people. When they arrived in larger numbers in Hamburg than could be immediately shipped from Cuxhaven at the mouth of the Elbe River across the Atlantic, the company built makeshift huts to house them temporarily.

Still, there was a marked contrast between the lower decks and the luxury that the company offered, especially in first class. The interior design and furniture allow Russell to analyze the relationship between the HAPAG leadership and a number of avant-garde architects and designers who argued that these ocean liners “offered a unique opportunity, not simply to showcase the achievements of German shipbuilding, engineering to Britain and America; it was also an important way of broadcasting the progressive nature and accomplishments of German art and design to an international audience” (p. 199). In this respect it was the art and cultural historian Abby Warburg who, together with other well-known intellectuals, tried to influence Ballin to adopt very modern ideas on interior design and architecture that evolved into the Bauhaus movement. Warburg, apparently with the encouragement of Eric Warburg, the Hamburgian banker and financier of commercial shipping, was hired as a HAPAG consultant. He tried his best to introduce Ballin to the work of a wider circle of cultural producers and craftsmen. The experiment failed and Warburg handed in his resignation when it became clear that first-class passengers, including wealthy Americans, preferred a more traditional environment in which they could relax and enjoy a glass of wine, a whiskey, or a cigar. Thus, keeping the paying guests happy was more important to Ballin than Warburg’s suggestions to introduce them to new styles of living. Russell rightly refers to the recent work on the rise of the grand hotels that modernized their bathrooms and elevators, but when it came to the living environment, they retained the quaint charm and sophistication that demanding American travelers expected to find during their visits to London, Paris, or Berlin.

Beyond these excursions into the history of design and architecture, there is, finally, the title of Russell’s book and the contribution it makes to the study of German nationalism before 1914, its character and its dynamic. He approaches this subject from basically three angles. There is, first of all, its impact back home. While Wilhelm II, Tirpitz, and the Hohenzollern monarchy’s other advisers expected the building of a “world-class” navy designed to challenge the prime position of Britain, to act as a tool to integrate a diverse society organized into some twenty-five principalities and kingdoms, Ballin assumed that commercial shipping and HAPAG’s great ocean liners similarly could be deployed to boost a great pride in the country’s perceived socioeconomic, diplomatic, and cultural achievements. But given the widening trenches that separated German society before 1914, popular enthusiasm had its limits. As Russell shows, while the workers who had built the *Imperator* and the rest of the passenger liners attended their launchings in Hamburg, Bremen, or the Baltic Sea ports, they did not join in the cheers that accompanied the baptism ceremonies of what appeared to some to be “monsters.” There were also the reservations at the other end of an increasingly polarized spectrum of Wilhelmine politics. It was not just the Kaiser’s “horrible” navy but also commercial shipping that was deemed a manifestation of Germany’s rising and ambitious industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and hence a threat to traditions power structures.

When Russell discusses the reception of German nationalism and its ambitions abroad, his careful evaluation of the American press and the welcoming spectators gathered along the Hudson River to watch the arrival of HAPAG’s *Imperator* in New York shows that the reporting on the event and also on the ship itself and its technological feats was mostly positive. When the Kaiser’s brother visited the United States in 1903, the royal visitor became quite exhausted by the many receptions and dinners he was asked to attend. Russell connects this hospitality to the geographic distance between the two continents. It was only very occasionally that the Imperial Navy was seen as a threat, as in 1902 when a German naval force appeared along the coast of Venezuela.

The British press and its reactions to HAPAG's and Norddeutscher Lloyd's liners stopping over in Portsmouth to pick up British passengers bound for New York were, not surprisingly, more critical, and not just because the Germans were competing with powerful British corporations such as Cunard and the White Star Line. Whatever threat Wilhelmine Germany posed to Britain militarily and commercially, it came right from across the North Sea. Yet it was not a united front of hostility. There were also expressions of friendship and hope that, whatever the diplomatic disagreements, it would be possible to reach an understanding. Britain did not want to fight a major war against Germany, so its attitudes have been viewed as early forms of appeasement before it became official policy in the 1930s to persuade Hitler not to launch a war of aggression.

This is therefore a book that offers a very differentiated picture not only of German commercial shipping but also of the technological, economic, and cultural forces driving German nationalist ambitions. Founded on extensive research in the archives and the international press, Russell's book opens a window to a world that not only professional historians but also graduate students and maritime history buffs will read with great benefit.

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