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978-0-521-46692-9 - The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866-1914

Nicholas Stargardt

Excerpt

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Introduction

Since the industrial revolution armies have often been compared to machines, the commanders and disciplined masses of men to their cogs and moving parts. The military mind tends to derive pleasure from this tidy and efficient simile, the critic of militarism a horror that rational and sentient beings could become so unquestioning, unthinking and submissive. This book explores the formation of this second point of view. A particular incident often draws together and expresses a multiplicity of ideas better than any theoretical tract. The incident which caught my attention occurred in the autumn of 1906. The German Empire was at its zenith. The Prussian army was widely heralded as the most efficient, best led and best trained in the world. At the time, the town of Köpenick – one of the oldest settlements around Berlin – had still to be swallowed up entirely by greater Berlin and, as we shall see, at least retained its administrative independence. On this particular autumn day, a Prussian infantry captain alighted from a train at Köpenick at the head of two squads of soldiers he had commandeered from the Berlin garrison.

After clattering across the square from the station, the captain posted a fusilier at each of the town hall's three entrances and made his way to the first floor office of the administration's secretary. There the military man informed the civilian that he was under arrest and should make himself ready for the trip to Berlin. A sentry was stationed on either side of him. With five grenadier guards still behind him, the captain entered the mayor's office. Himself a lieutenant in the reserve, the mayor leapt to his feet on seeing epaulettes and a royal Prussian blue uniform. As the captain later recounted, 'When he attempted to argue and persuade, I placed two grenadiers in front of him and handed him his hat.'¹

The police inspector was discovered fast asleep in his office. When the captain shook him awake and reprimanded him for dereliction of duty, the man backed away in fright and was only prevented from escaping from the building by the sentries. A rather cowed inspector now begged for permission to leave so that he could bathe. Nothing more was seen of him. Meanwhile, crowds were gathering outside, a meeting of city councillors

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was being held in the chamber, and finally the mayor's wife arrived to be by her husband's side in his time of trouble. Gallantly offering them both coffee, the captain allowed the lady to accompany her husband to Berlin. By a lucky chance, the sergeant [*Oberwachmeister*] of the District of Teltow also turned up, immediately sprang to attention and placed himself at the disposal of the captain, who entrusted him with organising two railway carriages for the return trip to Berlin. The acting mayor also reported for orders, while the captain was making out a receipt for the town treasury's cash balance of 4000 marks; he carefully locked away bills for some 2,000,000 marks in the safe, pocketed the cash and dismissed the acting mayor.

The captain made his own way back to Berlin, where he settled himself in a café from which he could watch the sergeant punctually leading his escort and prisoners to the Neue Wache Barracks. The captain attracted no attention in the café; by now he had transformed himself into an anonymous civilian. The uniform made the man.

Köpenick did not end there. The hero of this episode turned out to be a 57-year-old shoemaker and ex-convict, Wilhelm Voigt. He confessed to his 'subversive' act and stood trial before a packed and spell-bound court. The exploits of the 'Captain of Köpenick' caused a furore. Having served a total of 27 years' hard labour,² Voigt had managed to commandeer two squads of soldiers, take over a town hall and arrest the municipal authorities, all on the strength of wearing a captain's uniform and the knowledge of military commands he had gleaned from his own one year's service as a soldier and from military books in the prison libraries. As an ex-convict Voigt had been expelled from one town after another by the police authorities. All he had wanted at the Köpenick Rathaus was a passport – which under a 'catch-22' regulation about residence requirements he had previously been refused – so that he could leave Germany; and in this he failed. Halfway through his occupation of the building he realised he had come to the wrong office.³

Predictably, French journalists saw the entire episode as one more palpable proof that German society had been drilled into complete and blind subservience to the military machine. In Britain, the *Times* remarked archly that such things were only possible in Germany. To contemporaries the entire incident somehow expressed the quintessence of Prussian militarism. Soldiers had unhesitatingly obeyed the commands of an officer, though he apparently came from another unit. The civic authorities had not questioned the right of an army officer to march in and usurp their jurisdiction, without written orders. The co-operation of senior figures in the municipal administration and the civil service had been assured by their own pride in belonging to the reserve officer corps. Less privileged civilians

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had simply done their national service and learned to obey the hard way. Such reactions were entirely predictable. Public opinion in France had been obsessed with German militarism since the defeat in the war of 1870. The Prussian annexation of Alsace and Lorraine and the crassness of declaring the new German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, not to mention the indemnity France had to pay, all contributed to a veritable sense of national inferiority in the Third Republic.⁴ The German military was both reviled and anxiously imitated. In 1898, Admiral Tirpitz had initiated the naval race between Germany and Britain; the predictable result had been to drive the mutually hostile but also mutually anti-German governments of France and Britain together. By the time of Köpenick the *entente cordiale* which would take them into the first world war on the same side was already two years old. British caricaturists had already begun to study the strutting Prussian officer in place of their more familiar French and Russian butts. There was the picture Köpenick assumed to the outside world. It is also the image reproduced by many subsequent historical accounts of German militarism.

What was not part of this somewhat predictable and external image of militaristic Germans was the laughter. In Germany itself – and especially Berlin – people laughed and laughed. And laughter turned out to be subversive too. The Social Democratic press treasured up every detail as part of their indictment of German militarism. For the rest of October, *Vorwärts*, the daily of the German Social Democratic Party, gleefully recounted Voigt's adventures and the commentaries of the foreign press on this misadventure of German militarism.⁵ In any case, October 1906 was an inauspicious date for the Prussian army. It was the centenary of Napoleon's routing of the Prussian forces at Jena, a defeat which – as radicals fondly remembered – had led to the era of Prussian reform. Köpenick unleashed a cascade of laughter that drowned out decades of threats and bluster from the Kaiser and high-ranking military personnel.⁶ An ageing Junker, Oldenburg-Januschau, might tell the Reichstag in 1910 that one Prussian lieutenant with ten men ought to clear their chamber, but the 'Captain' had already done it.⁷ Colonel Reuther might do a real Köpenick in 1913 when he imposed a state of siege on the little Alsatian town of Saverne (in German Zabern), but he had to arrest a large number of people and lock them up in cellars – for laughing.⁸ Köpenick was, in Franz Mehring's mocking words, a 'second Jena'.⁹

Nor was the German public allowed to forget its significance. In 1932, on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power, Carl Zuckmayer wrote a brilliant comedy around the incident; after the war it entered the permanent theatrical repertoire of both East and West Germany. As a German radical Zuckmayer remembered to include the public response in his play.¹⁰ But

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1 'Shoemaker Voigt from Tilsit, the victor of Köpenick', from *Simplicissimus*, 1906

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the same year that Zuckmayer's play was first performed Franz von Papen detailed a lieutenant and twelve men to oust the Social Democratic government of Prussia, who duly vacated their offices muttering threats about future judicial proceedings.¹¹ Scenes of historical farce, it seems, may presage grave historical tragedies.

Hitherto the history of militarism has focused on hard structures. Historians are generally agreed that the German Empire was an authoritarian state whose constitution was a 'sham'. Ministers, like the army, were responsible to the Kaiser, not the Reichstag, whose parliamentary powers were restricted to blocking, rather than introducing, legislation and whose members were excluded from holding office. Furthermore, its power over the purse had already been curtailed by Bismarck; army and naval budgets only came up for approval every seven and five years. The Bundesrat, the Federal Council of the states, might draft and introduce legislation but Prussia, with its own system of government based on the highly anti-egalitarian three-class franchise, carried half the votes within its deliberations. Even at the Kaiser's dining table the Imperial Chancellor as a mere civilian gave place to the military entourage, while the Minister for Finance felt he had really made it on his promotion from sergeant to lieutenant. After Bismarck military attachés constantly rivalled the Foreign Office abroad and at home a key military figure like Admiral Tirpitz was able to dominate Chancellor Bülow and prescribe essential policies from the Naval Office for fifteen years.¹²

But militarism is not only about institutions and power. It is also about culture and ideas. 'Militarism' was a relatively late addition to the modern political vocabulary. And it was added by those Colonel Reuther interned for laughing rather than by the colonel himself. Militarism had more to do with the mockery and indictment than the object which was being mocked and indicted. The concept originated in German civil society, not in the peculiarities of the German state. From the outset a derogatory epithet, militarism became a common slogan in the 1860s, invoked by a diverse array of critics of Bismarck's Prussia and Napoleon III's France.¹³ Their object was indeed the 'garrison state' they saw being reconstructed around them. But in still absolutist Russia such criticism was simply not possible. The civic space did not yet exist. It is noteworthy that it was domestic civil protesters rather than foreign observers who first designated these Bonapartist and Bismarckian regimes the epitome of militarism. Opposition to the unification of Germany by force of Prussian arms was the one issue which bound together a motley collection of opposition groups in the late 1860s. There were radical republicans, South German particularists, Catholics and labour associations. Each meant something rather different by militarism but for a brief and significant moment of German history the

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neologism provided them with a common slogan of opposition. Protest against militarism thus offers some measure of the emergence of civil society out of reformed absolutism. This book concentrates on the changing motifs depicted as militarism between the 1860s and 1914.

How much does it matter what the origins of militarism are? After all, each generation has its own images to furnish the content of the term: for some, Jack London's iron heel crushing a human face; for others, the cynical waging of war to serve *Realpolitik* or imperialist gain; to yet others the failure to define the purposes for which wars were being fought at all. Few critics of militarism have abjured all violence. Anti-militarism and absolute pacifism – or pacificism as it was called before 1918 – are not the same thing at all.¹⁴ Most anti-militarists have had some measure of legitimate violence against which they can calibrate the scale of militarism. But just what this scale is and how it should be constructed is hardly a matter of consensus. What indeed could be less consensual than the forcible imposition of the political will of one group of people upon another? If ever Carl Schmitt's claim that the primary dichotomy of political theory was the partisan distinction between friend and foe applied, then surely it ought to apply here.¹⁵

Modern political theory also offers less overtly partisan definitions of militarism, even if they still carry their particular brands of politics about on their backs. If these theories and the historical scholarship with which each is associated have built up a persuasive and coherent account of militarism, then perhaps the intellectual origins of the concept should interest no one except intellectual historians. To set our expectations about this question of origins in order we might do well to approach them crabwise by moving sideways from the present. Four general definitions of militarism are currently in widespread use, each embedded in a different tradition of political theory:

- 1 A process of reciprocal armament which creates its own destabilising and irrational dynamic, leading towards economic ruin and/or war
- 2 A state which subordinates civil authority to the military in one or more arm of government
- 3 State coercion on behalf of capitalist class interests against subordinate classes within the nation and/or against other nations
- 4 The failure to subordinate military to political goals in the waging of war

These four definitions correspond broadly to pacifist, liberal, Marxist and realist approaches respectively. Consonant with their own pre-existing concerns, each of these four theories also presents a different solution to

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militarism. Pacifists, Liberals and Marxists all predicted a world without war; realists did not. Pacifists saw the solution to war in disarmament and frequently demanded it on ethical grounds. Liberals and Marxists generally also accepted disarmament as an 'end goal' but set it up as the culminating moment in a longer process. For the Liberal tradition, militarism was essentially a hangover from absolutist times, which modern industry, trade and representative government ought to sweep aside. In the 1880s Herbert Spencer transformed this polarity between enlightened and pre-enlightenment forces into a sociological dichotomy between 'industrial' and 'military societies'. In it he equated the forces of peace and progress with industrialisation in a highly determinist and positivist fashion, whilst taking the 'primitive' savagery of Fiji islanders as characteristic of 'military society'.¹⁶

The determinism if not the details of this sociological approach converged with that worked out by Marxists after the deaths of Marx and Engels; except they postponed the triumph of peace and progress until after class conflicts within industrial capitalism had been transcended. This vantage point at least permitted them to explain – as Spencer and perhaps even Richard Cobden could not have done – how it was that 'civilised' industrial states could prepare for and wage the greatest wars of all. But their solution also turned out – at least in the experience of this century – to be chimerical. The 'socialist' or 'post-capitalist' regimes of the old Eastern Europe spent an enormous if still unquantified amount of their national income on armament.

The failure of all these programmes to transcend war ought to be so much grist to the mill of American realists. After all the realist tradition never claimed that war could be ended. But by reducing war to a matter of political expediency realists also leave out of the equation precisely the questions of subordination and violence which transform human beings into blind instruments and which ever since Kant spoke about the 'Kingdom of ends', of treating all human beings as ends in themselves, have been so central to the debate.

All four definitions date back to at least the nineteenth century and all were used in Imperial Germany. They also reappear in the interpretations of historians writing about Imperial Germany. This intermingling of subject matter, interpretative frameworks and modern political theory is potentially highly confusing. It places a premium on avoiding muddling overlaps. It is therefore worth considering these four positions in a little more detail.

The first definition takes the arms race as its referent; the theme of systemic irrationality has been stressed by contemporary peace researchers such as Dieter Senghaas.¹⁷ Behind it stand arguments about the inherently

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destabilising domestic and international repercussions of reciprocal armament. Through overtaxing populations or diverting state expenditure from civil and cultural projects to the arms race governments create the basis for transforming even liberal democratic regimes into anti-liberal 'garrison states'. In its domestic themes this account merges with either liberal or Marxist versions at this point. But in its primary focus on international rivalries, the pacifist story foretells common economic ruin or a preventive war launched by one of the players who was on the point of being forced out of the game. One of the first statements of this position was Kant's insistence that external peace was a necessary precondition for the domestic liberty of a republic.¹⁸ From the 1850s on, many of the same arguments in favour of international disarmament were promoted by the Peace Society.¹⁹ Often disarmament was linked to other great causes, such as anti-slavery and especially free trade as in the writings of the organiser of the first Peace Congresses, Richard Cobden. Not surprisingly, since military spending was the principal item on any state's budget until the post-1945 period at least, disarmament was almost always linked to low taxes. By the 1890s and 1900s, Kant's slightly wry plea for 'perpetual peace' had been inscribed on the banners of social democratic sporting and recreational organisations as an ethical endeavour. The first congress of the Second International, which met in Paris to celebrate the centenary of the French revolution, denounced the arms race as a cause of war.²⁰

Like the pacifists – and unlike Marxists and liberals – realists also concentrate on military action as a purely external activity, war. For the realist tradition, warfare is a normal, indeed the central, role of government. This assertion rests upon a geopolitical framework in which the main function of the state is to safeguard itself from threats from other states.²¹ As Otto Hintze insisted, 'All state organisation was originally military organisation.'²² War becomes pathological and illegitimate when it is waged without reason, without policy. Conversely, the measure of legitimate violence is set by Clausewitz's dictum about war being the pursuit of policy by other means.²³ A war without aims or whose aims are dictated by strategic rather than political concerns would count as militarism. This realist tradition is frequently denoted as 'reason of state', and its adherents have been predictably well entrenched under regimes which considered themselves to be the primary powers of their day: in the eighteenth century people spoke of '*raison d'état*', in the late nineteenth of '*Staatsräson*' and in the post-1945 US Department of State simply of 'realism'. In its German manifestation, *Staatsräson* was one of the unifying principles of the Prussian historical school, whose leading exponents have included Otto Hintze at the turn of the century, Friedrich Meinecke in the inter-war years, Gerhard Ritter in the post-war period, down to Michael

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Stürmer and Andreas Hillgruber in the present.²⁴ For them realism is *Realpolitik* and its heroes would include Frederick II of Prussia and Bismarck. But like the revisionist German Foreign Office of the 1920s, they would generally concede that the later Imperial period and especially the conduct of the first world war provided evidence of militarism, or – in Ritter’s words – an ‘over-rating of the military aspect of things’.²⁵

But it is noteworthy that this tradition did not acknowledge the actual term ‘militarism’ at all until after Germany’s defeat in the first world war. Until 1914 the word belonged entirely to the radicals and oppositionalists. After the outbreak of the war, sections of the Wilhelmine establishment attempted to take over the concept and set it alongside patriotism and national defence as a true teutonic virtue. After the defeat of 1918, it was only the proto-Nazi extreme Right which persisted in claiming that the manly, military virtues represented the positive content of *militarism*.²⁶ Conservative nationalists continued to eschew the term, even if like Meinecke and Ritter they still preferred to minimise its negative content. At a more historical level, their approach certainly does make sense of the construction of eighteenth-century absolutism, especially in Prussia, where the state was primarily geared to war and expansion. But it does not do justice to the complex administrative structures or the intervention in society and economy which characterised the nation state which Bismarck constructed and in which the term ‘militarism’ was actually coined.

In marked contrast, liberal political theorists have focused on domestic political arrangements from the outset. Their prime interest lay in safeguarding civil society from the state, rather than safeguarding the state from other states, and this led them to concentrate on the domestic role of the army. From their perspective, the casual admission that the military aspect of things might have been ‘over-rated’ hardly begins to touch the question of a society in which Köpenick could occur. This tradition of military criticism has its origins in classical republicanism and its early modern reappraisal. The key to the relation between the citizen and his state for this tradition was at least as much the right to bear arms as the right to vote. It was a duty of citizenship to be prepared to die for the polity which guaranteed individual freedom, just as an army composed of citizens was the only domestic guarantee of that collective freedom against despots and their standing armies. Both the French and American revolutionaries immortalised this principle.

This juxtaposition between absolutism coupled with hired mercenaries and the free citizens’ militia of the republic is one of the few elements of humanist political theory to survive the twists and turns of three hundred years of debate as successive generations struggled to take account of representative government, commercial society and finally capitalism. It is

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one of the unbroken threads connecting Machiavelli through the English, Dutch, French and finally German enlightenment critics to radical and socialist writers of the late nineteenth century. It winds through the writings of Harrington, Spinoza, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, and even Hegel to such Wilhelmine critics as the Left Liberal historian Ludwig Quidde, the founders of German Social Democracy Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, and the so-called ‘pope’ of orthodox Marxism Karl Kautsky.²⁷ It is also a tradition whose ideal was tarnished by the reality of war fought by that modern proxy of the armed citizenry, national service armies. After the Great War, only the Communist Left continued to advocate the citizens’ militia. Even on the eve of the first world War other anti-militarists had turned decisively away from the militia and towards international disarmament. For this long-enduring and fundamental democratic principle, 1914 marks the end of civic humanism and the enlightenment.

But a less radical version of liberal anti-militarism survived the state-building efforts of the late nineteenth century and the disillusionment of the first world war. In this version it mattered relatively little whether the army was a permanent professional or a part-time citizen force so long as it could be held responsible to a civilian government and respected the independence of civil society. This was the position of most Prussian ‘Young’ Liberals at the time of the constitutional conflict between Bismarck and the Prussian Chamber.²⁸ From this point the balance between military and civil authority becomes an issue of jurisdiction, legal norms and sanctions. This is the central issue behind Köpenick. It is also a subject which has continued to exercise its fascination over historians trying to unravel the roots of Nazism.

As the full horror of the holocaust was absorbed in the aftermath of the second world war, many from the side of the Western allies found themselves asking: ‘If the German nation was collectively guilty of Nazism, what abnormal historical development could lead to such uniquely awful consequences?’ In the immediate aftermath of the war, while the British occupying authorities were writing memoranda about how to water down ‘evil teutonic blood’ and ‘educate the Germans for self-government’, even liberal-minded British historians were drawn towards psychological and semi-racist explanations. The Germans simply had a warped national character. The sorts of militaristic and authoritarian motifs of Imperial Germany described so brilliantly by Heinrich Mann in *Der Untertan* or Elizabeth von Arnim in *The Caravaners* were joined to other threads. The Great Elector, Frederick the Great, Bismarck and Wilhelm II became the central figures in a tapestry depicting external conquest and domestic intolerance whose closing sequences revealed the