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The Land Arms Race and World War I

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Gilbert, Martin. A History of the Twentieth Century. Volume One: 1900-1933. New York: William Morrow, 1997.

Herrmann, David G. The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Stevenson, David. Armaments and the Coming of the War. Europe, 1904-1914. New York and Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

What was the military context in Europe before World War I? Scholars have traditionally answered this question by emphasizing that the naval competition was essential to the heightened tensions in pre-war Europe. However, some recent historical works strongly question approaches that rank this naval arms competition higher than the lands arms race. Although the naval situation was of concern to the European politicians and public, they argue political leaders considered the army as the dominant force in any upcoming continental conflict. Both David G. Herrmann and David Stevenson break new ground by arguing that army considerations combined with international crises to push Europe into war in 1914. By contrast, Martin Gilbert pays little attention to this military competition as he propounds the standard view that mainly the naval arms race foreshadowed the later war.

Of these three studies, Herrmann's The Arming of Europe offers the most complete analysis of the particular technological changes that preceded World War I. The major European armies were all faced with the challenge of keeping up with their neighbors as one invention followed another. In the era immediately before the war, these armies all incorporated machine guns, heavy field artillery, telephones, telegrams, motor transport, aeroplanes, field kitchens and neutral-colored uniforms into their daily functions. A strong suit of Herrmann's research is his exacting and detailed coverage of each innovation's evolution. For example, in 1904 the French army led the field artillery race with its 75 millimeter guns. All of the other major European armies rushed to imitate the French, and the technological gap quickly closed. By 1914 Germany surpassed France in the amount and efficacy of its field artillery, which now included the light field howitzers.

Shedding further light on the arms race, Herrmann emphasizes how quickly aeroplanes were developed into combat and reconnaissance machines. The French had originally taken the lead in this branch of the army, but the Germans and, to a lesser extent, the British were catching up by 1914. The aeroplane offered several advantages over the dirigible airship: speed, higher altitudes, invulnerability to land artillery, and landing flexibility. Valuable to civilian leaders, it also was cheaper than the costly dirigible airships. Even though many of the early aeroplanes crashed, both the general public and the politicians became fascinated with its crucial military capabilities.

As the land armaments competition escalated, European armies went to great lengths to study each others' strengths and weaknesses. They analyzed official government and army papers, newspapers, military attaches' reports, espionage and direct observation. For these observers, the true lessons of the Anglo-Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars were that rapid attacks, integrated armament plans, and high morale would inevitably win the wars of the future. Thus, these military strategists made the costly mistake of ignoring defensive capacities that would prove to be paramount in World War I. Another weakness proved to be the era's "intense nationalism and racialism" which entered into official documents and policies. As Herrmann notes, in "assessments of army effectiveness . . . military men of all European nations developed remarkably consistent impressions." (p.79) These impressions were founded upon racial and ethnic prejudices. Generally, the French were seen as brilliant but disorganized, the Germans as organized but rigid, the Russians as defensive and corrupt, and the Austrio-Hungarians as disciplined and uncreative. These banal stereotypes continued until the war began and left armies unprepared for some of the subtle innovations that had occurred between 1904 and 1914.

Although Herrmann makes a convincing case for army plans overriding naval ones, in doing so he gives a limited picture of the senior civilian leaders. These political leaders are pushed into the background, and are overshadowed by the top military officials. Overall, this work begs the question of how the leading politicians participated in each crisis and debate. One study that does provide a rich coverage of the interaction between political leaders and military events is Stevenson's Armaments and the Coming of War. While Herrmann mainly narrows his focus to army preparations and innovations, Stevenson moves from these issues to comparative politics, diplomatic events, alliance transformations, and conflict studies. Generally, Herrmann's book provides a detailed account of two aspects of the military before World War I, while Stevenson's work constitutes a more comprehensive outlook on these same dynamics.

Besides these differences between the two studies, it is also important to emphasize their numerous similarities. Both Herrmann and Stevenson have similar starting points: that the pre-First World War lands arms race has been neglected by scholars for too long. Furthermore, both researched the material through the same method - extensively using the archives of all the main western and central European nations of the early twentieth century. Both support their claims with relevant statistics, tables, and quotes, and both explain the significant changes not found in the annual military budgets. A concise explanation of the two works can be found in Stevenson's preface. It explains that "this book is a history of the politics of armaments in Europe before 1914," while Herrmann's book is a "study of the evolution of the European military balance." (p.v,vi)

Stevenson ventures beyond Herrmann's study when he critiques the various explanatory models of the origins of World War I. The action-reaction model is incomplete since the war frequently matched the longer term strategies of several governments. Likewise, Stevenson criticizes the technological imperative model due to the fact that most army innovations were completed and implemented by 1910-11, more than three years before the war. Similarly, the domestic structure model fails to explain the extensive public

opposition to spending increases and military service. Yet another explanation that Stevenson rejects is the military-industry complex model, which overlooks the fact that private military arms manufacturers mostly influenced design decisions and not policy choices. Instead of these inadequate explanations, Stevenson proposes that by 1914 the arms race and international crises of the pre-war decade severely limited the flexibility of political leaders.

Stevenson later explains how international events and intra-bloc rivalry disrupted the two opposing military alliances. The Russo-Japanese War left the Russian military completely devastated, but its ambitious rebuilding program and huge population (i.e., the largest standing army) put its rivals on notice as to how strong it would become in the future. Following the beginning of Austria-Hungary's massive Balkan problems in 1908, the Russians wanted to assert their influence in this Slavic region. However, their powerful participation was halted when their ally France threatened to withdraw a massive loan that Russia desperately needed to spur development. Thus, Russia resented French financial control while France looked down on Russian military preparations. The coverage of this crucial event shows one of the key strengths of Stevenson's book: detailed descriptions of international crises with in-depth coverage of various nations' perspectives.

While Herrmann and Stevenson give thorough accounts of very specific topics, Gilbert does just the opposite in his A History of the Twentieth Century: Volume I, 1900-1933. In this wide- ranging work Gilbert strives for coverage of as many events, regions, conflicts, powers, and ideologies as possible. Overall, Gilbert attempts to achieve a balance between diplomacy and conflict as well as technology's achievements and destructiveness. This impressionistic approach to history offers quick sketches and then hurriedly moves on to the next subject.

Although Gilbert's work has the advantage of breath, it lacks any substantial or new interpretation of the origins of the First World War. For the most part Gilbert seems quite content with the traditional thesis that the naval competition was a decisive factor in producing this conflict. Even though Herrmann's and Stevenson's books were published in 1996 (a year before Gilbert's) and were preceded by articles asserting the lands arms race over the naval one, Gilbert seems to ignore this recent debate. Much of this has to do with Gilbert's methodology, which relies heavily on primary sources, uses very few footnotes, includes a brief bibliography, and frequently avoids current scholarly controversies. In general, the chapters covering the era before World War I place much more importance on naval technologies than on the multitude on army innovations.

As for which book to read, it depends on which pre-1914 topic interests you the most. Herrmann's work skillfully covers the centrality of technological inventions and army considerations, but fails to highlight the top civilian leaders. His writing style is passable and lucid while the text is a slow read due to the density of information. In comparison, Stevenson has a better narrative style and his text aptly combines specific facts with larger truths. Since his work connects the land arms race to all relevant political events, it is the best general history of the 1904-14 time period. Finally, Gilbert's work is the least

useful of the three when it comes to covering the European armaments competition before World War I. On the other hand, Gilbert's narrative style is the most well-written in this group and makes for a fast paced and entertaining historical narrative. This work should be read only as an introduction to the first third of this century. Even though Herrmann and Stevenson cover some of the same territory, their two books make complementary companion pieces well worth reading.

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