

# MOMMSEN AND IMPERIALISM REVISITED: FROM JUSTIFIABLE CONQUEST TO THE PERILS OF EMPIRE<sup>1</sup>

— CARSTEN HJORT LANGE —

## ABSTRACT

*In the first half of the nineteenth century, national and liberal political currents significantly increased politicisation in Schleswig, Holstein, and Denmark. The Three Years' War (1848–1851) and the Danish defeat in 1864 were pivotal events in this context. Theodor Mommsen's work, particularly his views on Roman imperialism, remains relevant today. Scholars often claim that Mommsen laid the foundations for the approach to the past described as 'defensive imperialism'. Seldom used in this context is Mommsen's 1865 work *Die Annexion Schleswig-Holsteins: ein Sendschreiben an die Wahlmänner der Stadt Halle und des Saalkreises*. The work is based on Hegel's view of history and explains the expansion to the north (the duchies) as a historical necessity. The German navy played a decisive role here, as bases for the navy were another necessity. Mommsen accepted Roman imperialism until the turning point, the Second Punic War. The unification of Italy under Roman rule and the unification of Germany — including the annexation of the duchies — can only be described as acts of imperialism. What he opposed were the dangers inherent in overexpansion. The notion of Mommsen as an anti-imperialist must therefore be rejected or at least contextualised. The conquest of the duchies and the defeat of Denmark in the 1864 war were acceptable because they provided access to the sea and aligned with visions of Germany's natural frontiers.*

## KEYWORDS

*Theodor Mommsen, William V. Harris, Roman Imperialism, Imperialism, First Punic War, Second Punic War, Three Years' War, Denmark, Prussia, Germany, 1848, 1864*

**I**n the first half of the nineteenth century, national and liberal political currents led to a marked increase in politicisation, both in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and in Denmark. The King of Denmark was also duke of Holstein, part of the German Confederation, and Schleswig. The Three Years' War concerned who should control the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein (and Lauenburg). The duchies were ruled by the King of Denmark in a personal union (*Helstaten*). Major events,

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to John Rich, Jan Schlürmann, and Henning Börn, as well as the editors and anonymous referees, for their valuable comments and suggestions.

such as the revolutionary year of 1848, the Three Years' War (*Treårskrigen*) from 1848 to 1851 — between rebels in the duchies and the Kingdom of Denmark, with outside interference —, and the Danish defeat in 1864, are crucial points in this development.<sup>2</sup> The polarisation of the duchies also had a major impact on the modern study of the ancient world. Scholars and politicians such as Johann Gustav Droysen, professor at Kiel from 1840, and Theodor Mommsen played an active role in the German national movement in Schleswig-Holstein.<sup>3</sup>

On the Danish side, the counterbalance was provided by scholars like Johan Nicolai Madvig, a classical philologist and politician. Madvig's posthumously published autobiography, *Livserindringer*, contains a critique of Mommsen, who Madvig considers overrated.<sup>4</sup> In *Liv og Rejser omkring Århundredeskiftet*, Frederik Poulsen describes a wet evening with Mommsen in Munich in 1897. Mommsen is portrayed in a very unfriendly light, and there can be little doubt about his view of Denmark. The description clearly reflects a German narrative about the enemy Denmark:<sup>5</sup>

But then followed the malice that I failed to reciprocate. Suddenly Mommsen turned to me and listed in Danish, first one of Wessel's most rude poems, then all the coastal towns on Zealand, from Elsinore to Vordingborg, Præstø, Faxe and Køge. "How well you remember, Your Excellency? You must have had good schools in Danish Holstein after all." "Of course I remember," snarled the courtier. Our rulers lived in these villages ["in diesen Dörfern wohnten ja unsere Beherrscher."]. The reply stung in its hilarity, but my brain went numb, and I owed him an answer.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The best assessment of Mommsen's view of Roman imperialism is Linderski's (1995) splendid essay on the subject: the German nationalist Mommsen believed Rome's destiny was to unite Italy, but defensive policies led Rome to conquer the Mediterranean world as well. See Clark (2023) for the revolutions of 1848.

<sup>3</sup> General introductions to Mommsen include Heuss (1956); Wickert (1959–1980); Rebenich (2002); Demandt et al. (2005); Nippel (2017); Barber (2022). Droysen, who identified the distinct character of the post-Alexander period, which he termed *Hellenismus* in *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836–1843), published a contemporary work in 1850, *Die Herzogthümer Schleswig-Holstein und das Königreich Dänemark*. See Nippel (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Madvig (1887) 113. See also philologist and archaeologist Johan Louis Ussing's *Af Mit Levned*, posthumously published in 1906.

<sup>5</sup> Poulsen (1946) 86; cf. Poulsen (1946) 84–86; Skydsgaard (1997).

<sup>6</sup> "Men derefter fulgte den Ondskabsfuldhed, som det ikke lykkedes mig at give igen paa. Pludselig vendte Mommsen sig imod mig og opremsede paa Dansk først et af Wessels uartigste Digte, derefter alle Kystbyerne på Sjælland lige fra Helsingør til

Christian Matthias Theodor Mommsen was born in Garding, Schleswig, in 1817 into a German family, and died in Berlin in 1903. He grew up in modest circumstances in a clergyman's family in Oldesloe, Holstein. Mommsen studied law at the University of Kiel, specialising in Roman law. A travel grant from the King of Denmark enabled him to travel to Italy from 1844 to 1847.<sup>7</sup> In the revolutionary year of 1848, Mommsen was editor of the *Schleswig-Holsteinische Zeitung*.<sup>8</sup> Whatever positive feelings he may have had towards Denmark and the Danish king disappeared with the Three Years' War. After the Battle of Schleswig on Easter morning 1848, Mommsen concludes his article on the course of the battle with the following salute: "Es war ein schneller und ein schöner Sieg; kein Schleswig-Holsteiner wird es je vergessen, wie am Ostertage 1848 die Preußen bei Schleswig die Auferstehung Deutschlands gefeiert haben."<sup>9</sup> It is a clear mixture of nationalism and romanticism. As we know, the year of revolution did not end as Mommsen and others had wished. After the German-speaking states were forced to withdraw their support, the war ended in a Danish victory. Mommsen and his contemporaries had to wait for German unification until after the wars of unification, which included the victory over Denmark in 1864 (also known as the Second Schleswig-Holstein War).

After an academically turbulent period as a professor of Roman Law, first in Leipzig (appointed in 1848, dismissed in 1851 because of his liberal political activities in connection with the 1848/49 revolution), and later in Zurich and Breslau, Mommsen became secretary of the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1858, and professor of history at the University of Berlin in 1861 (Droysen became professor there in 1859). Mommsen's background in constitutional law is evident in his groundbreaking work *Römisches Staatsrecht* (five volumes, 1871–1888).<sup>10</sup> Mommsen is best

Vordingborg, Præstø, Fakse og Køge. »Hvor kan De dog huske godt, Deres Excellence, De maa alligevel have haft gode Skoler i det danske Holsten.« »Naturligvis kan jeg huske det, snerrede Hofraaden. I disse Landsbyer boede jo vore Herskere — » in diesen Dörfern wohnten ja unsere Beherrschung.« Repliken sved i sin Morsomhed, men min Hjerne gik i staa, og jeg blev ham Svar skyldig.«

<sup>7</sup> Marquard (1930).

<sup>8</sup> See Gehrcke (1927).

<sup>9</sup> *Schleswig-Holsteinische Zeitung* 9, 25. April 1848. See *Reden und Aufsätze*, 372. Jessen-Klingenborg (2005) 124 argues that the portrayal of the victory (and its context) is excessively positive.

<sup>10</sup> On this, see Nippel (2005). It should also be noted that Mommsen is renowned for his *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (*CIL*). Established in 1853 on his initiative as a project of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, the *CIL* remained under his leadership until his death. For a general introduction to Mommsen's work, see Nippel (2017).

known, however, for his monumental *Römische Geschichte* (RG).<sup>11</sup> Initially volumes 1–3 were published in 1854–1856 (from the foundation of Rome to Caesar), just after the Three Years' War, and written largely in exile in Zurich. After a long delay, the fifth volume on the provinces was produced, while the fourth volume on the principate up to Diocletian never appeared.<sup>12</sup> Mommsen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902, primarily for his monumental work *Römische Geschichte*. He is rightly regarded as one of the most influential ancient historians of all time.

Mommsen's own era — the long nineteenth century — is, however, seldom represented in contemporary scholarly debates on ancient history. Although Mommsen may be mentioned in today's discussions of Roman expansion, the references unfortunately indicate that he is not always read. The nature of imperialism, namely its fundamental characteristics, is otherwise of particular Danish interest. In 1865, Mommsen helped to justify the war and the Prussian conquest of the duchies after the Danish defeat in 1864. The question therefore arises whether Mommsen used his knowledge of the Roman past to understand his own contemporary period, or whether he used his contemporary period as a prism to understand the past. This is particularly relevant in connection with the unification of Germany and the unification of Italy under Rome, as well as the role of the navy in this development as an instrument of imperialism.<sup>13</sup> This article therefore seeks to identify two overlapping phases in Mommsen's reflections on Roman and German expansion, ranging from annexation viewed as a historical necessity (the unification of Italy under Rome and Germany under Prussia) to concerns about the perils of overexpansion, particularly in relation to overseas ventures. Linderski writes of *Römische Geschichte* that “[a] history this is not; as a grandiose political pamphlet it has few equals.”<sup>14</sup> The answer must be

<sup>11</sup> For the impact of *Römische Geschichte*, see now the fine introduction by Rebenich (2022). As Nippel (2017) 21 points out, not everyone was satisfied: “Mommsen gab kaum Belege [resulting in: scharfe Kritik]. Zwischenzeitlich hatte er erwogen, einen Separatband mit Quellennachweisen erscheinen zu lassen, den Plan aber wieder aufgegeben.”

<sup>12</sup> *Römische Kaisergeschichte* are papers found by Alexander Demandt in 1980 and published in 1992. They are a transcript of Mommsen's lectures. It would therefore be problematic to claim they are volume 4 of *Römische Geschichte*.

<sup>13</sup> Linderski (1995) 133 writes of Mommsen's view of imperialism that “Theodor Mommsen is the originator, and to many the holy patron, of the idea of defensive imperialism”. This is followed by the correct interpretation: “But above all the *Römische Geschichte* was a product of the painful and sobering experience of the revolution of 1848.”

<sup>14</sup> Linderski (1995) 134.

that Mommsen's work is in fact excellent history, but one does not exclude the other. His ability to connect past and present makes his work relevant, even today.

## Text and Context

From the recognition that all historiography is in its essence a 'contemporary' representation of the past, the desire arises to understand the influence of the present on historical presentation. The relationship between text and context is central to historiography. But what do historians do when our perception of the past is based on historiographical traditions whose origins and contexts have been forgotten? Today, there is a scholarly consensus that Mommsen, on the basis of ancient sources and an understanding of his own time, laid the foundations for the approach described as 'defensive imperialism' (coined by Tenney Frank 1914 in *Roman Imperialism*).<sup>15</sup> The starting point to this is Rome and Rome's desire to ensure its own security. The empire is created by chance, and Rome is attacked or has no other choice but to attack. The question arises whether this is a correct representation of Mommsen's view of Rome's history of expansion?

To understand Mommsen, therefore, we must understand his time in its context, especially with the revolutionary year of 1848, the Three Years' War of 1848–51 and 1864, and the Danish *Helstat* as a framework for understanding. For Mommsen, the 'nature of imperialism' is the desire of Rome and Germany to extend their power and influence beyond their own borders, but still within their perceived natural boundaries.<sup>16</sup> To understand this development, we must first understand Mommsen's view of history, which builds on Hegel's idea of history as marked by necessity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Hammond (1948) on the use of the concept of *imperialism* in ancient history. Frank, the first classical scholar to offer a systematic analysis of imperialism, developed the thesis of 'defensive' imperialism. It is worth adding that, in the end, an American – the US was and still is an imperial state, although it often tries to hide this fact (Immerwahr (2019)) – was always the most likely candidate for such a theory. See also Holleaux (1921), who wrote shortly after Frank; later came Badian (1968), among others. For a complete bibliography, see Burton (2019).

<sup>16</sup> The concept of 'natural borders' originates in France during the seventeenth century, gains prominence during the French Revolution, and resurfaces in political discourse during the Rhine Crisis of 1840. See Sahlins (1990).

<sup>17</sup> Hegel's philosophy of history argues that there is a necessity behind the development of history. Christ (2021) 28 writes: "Für Mommsen sind Romes Einigung Italiens und seine Herrschaft über den antiken Mittelmeerraum eine „Unanwendbarkeit [...]“; cf. Linderski (1995) 137 on the fear of uncertainty. The fear of uncertainty led

In more general terms, Mommsen did not depict Roman expansion as a pursuit of conquest for its own sake, but rather as a strategic and defensive necessity. According to this interpretation, Rome extended its territory primarily to secure its borders and protect itself from external threats. However, the act of securing borders inherently entailed expansion, which – by modern standards – may be classified as imperialism, involving aggression against neighbouring Italian communities. These borders may have been conceived as Rome's natural frontiers, yet the communities within them were not originally part of the Roman state. Whether this in reality constitutes imperial ambition is debatable and ultimately a matter of semantics. As a modern analytical concept, it should not be labelled 'defensive imperialism'. Mommsen accepted this expansion as necessary, both in the context of ancient Rome and again in 1865.

There is no doubt that Mommsen accepted a form of imperialism that may or may not be called 'defensive imperialism'.<sup>18</sup> Problems arise, however, when we try to read Rome's general tendency towards expansion together with Mommsen's view of history as marked by necessity. The unification of Rome was a necessity, just as the future unification of Germany was one. Mommsen summarises his view of Roman expansion as follows (*RG* 1.781):<sup>19</sup>

Werfen wir zum Schluß einen Blick zurück auf den von Rom seit der Einigung Italiens bis auf Makedoniens Zertrümmerung durchmessen Lauf, so erscheint die römische Weltherrschaft keineswegs als ein von unersättlicher Ländergier entworfener und durchgeföhrter Riesenplan, sondern als ein Ergebnis, das der römischen Regierung sich ohne, ja wider ihren Willen aufgedrungen hat.

It becomes clear there is a difference between the unification of Italy (necessity) and the overseas expansion, which is characterised by 'defensive imperialism'; where Rome does not act but only reacts. There was no 'master plan'. He repeats on the same page that Rome "nichts wollte und begehrte als die Herrschaft über Italien." This may seem

Mommsen and others to speak of necessity. See Anders Engberg-Pedersen's *Empire of Chance* (2015), which describes the world as fundamentally uncertain in the nineteenth century and the desire for models to explain the uncertainty.

<sup>18</sup> Linderski (1995) 136: "Mommsen wrote his two famous pages [*RG* 1.781f.], the cradle of the defensive theory of Roman imperialism."

<sup>19</sup> *RG* 1.781 refers to book 1 and page number 781. All references to the *RG* are from the *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft* 2021-German-edition.

almost politically naïve, but it fits well with Mommsen's view of imperialism. Rome had no plan beyond the unification of Italy, which was a historical necessity. The rest was more a matter of chance than anything else.

Mommsen the 'man' and the 'politician', reflected by his contemporary baggage, can therefore help us to understand Mommsen the 'historian', and vice versa. Not least, the connection between Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte* (the first three volumes, 1854–1856), and his view of the unification of Italy under Rome, can be directly related to Germany and Mommsen's dream of national unification. There is broad agreement that Mommsen had a contemporary historical perspective in his descriptions of the past: "So vermischt die Darstellung die geschichtliche und die zeitgenössische Perspektive."<sup>20</sup> The question is, however, whether this applies both ways. Did Mommsen also get to know his own contemporary world through Rome?

Surprisingly, seldom used in this context is Mommsen's 1865 work *Die Annexion Schleswig-Holsteins: ein Sendschreiben an die Wahlmänner der Stadt Halle und des Saalkreises*.<sup>21</sup> Mommsen formally addressed his open letter to his electoral district, but in effect, the text was directed at the broader German public. We are a long way from the revolutionary year of 1848 and the Three Years' War, but just after Prussia's victory over Denmark in 1864 (the official act of Prussian annexation (*Inkorporationspatent*) dates from January 1867).<sup>22</sup> The work is clearly based on Hegel's view of history and explains the expansion to the north (the duchies) as a historical necessity. The German navy played a decisive role here, as bases for the navy were another necessity.

Later, in a newspaper interview in 1898, Mommsen spoke out against the use of a German navy for conquest in the world beyond Germany's natural borders. The interview comes shortly after Alfred von Tirpitz's infamous memorandum of 1897, followed in 1898 by the first of the great German Naval Acts.<sup>23</sup> The memorandum dealt with the composition and purpose of the German navy, defining Britain as the main enemy, and stating that the main area of conflict would be between Helgoland and the

<sup>20</sup> See Rebenich (Mommsen (2021), intro, *RG* vol. 1, xi).

<sup>21</sup> Wickert (1959–1980) 4.59–62 analyses Mommsen's allegedly changing attitude towards imperialism but rightly concludes that Mommsen ultimately decided to support annexation. Mommsen had been a member of the German parliament since 1859, and Halle was his constituency.

<sup>22</sup> After the Prussian victory in 1864, Prussia had received Schleswig and Austria Holstein, but this too went to Prussia after Austria's defeat in the Austro-Prussian War.

<sup>23</sup> The 1897 memorandum can be found in the appendix of Steinberg's 1965 work (with both the German original and an English translation).

Thames.<sup>24</sup> However, the interview in question cannot be used to prove that Mommsen was anti-imperialist.<sup>25</sup> It demonstrates that Mommsen was a specific kind of imperialist; an imperialist when it came to the unification of Germany (and Italy under Rome). This becomes even clearer when the 1865 text is used as a retrospective guide to reading the *Römische Geschichte*. Jansen notes that Mommsen became more sceptical about the military path after 1870/71.<sup>26</sup> It was precisely the transition from the unification to *Weltpolitik* that worried Mommsen.

It seems, then, that for Mommsen an empire (and thus imperialism) only began when power was extended beyond the relatively homogeneous heartland into provinces or colonies. This may be why Mommsen did not see Roman imperialism in Italy (“in seinen natürlichen Grenzen”) or German imperialism in Germany. Of course, his definition of the “natural borders” of Italy or Germany was questionable or even deeply problematic, but he assumed that these borders existed and that expansion within them was not imperialism but unification.

In other words, Mommsen considered expansion beyond Germany’s natural borders problematic. The concept of ‘natural borders’ has come under pressure in modern research. Today, we instead speak of ‘geo-strategic’ thinking. This has the advantage that, instead of a ‘master plan’, one can explore different strategies in the various theatres of war. In his *Römische Geschichte*, Mommsen writes of the “schnelle Ausdehnung des Römerreiches bis an und über Italien natürliche Grenzen” (1.7; cf. 1.540ff.). The concept of ‘unification’ is crucial in this context (see above, *RG* 1.781). When we speak of ‘conquest’, we are of course speaking of imperialism and expansion. When we talk about ‘unification’, we discuss bringing together territories that naturally belong together.<sup>27</sup> It is naïve, however, to believe that ‘unification’ as used of the Roman unification of

<sup>24</sup> Tirpitz Memorandum, section 2: “For Germany the most dangerous naval enemy at the present time is England.”/“Für Deutschland ist zur Zeit der gefährlichste Gegner zur See England.” Section 3 mentions the very few German bases compared to the many British bases. Section 6: “The military situation against England demands battleships in as great a number as possible.”/“Die militärische Situation gegen England erfordert Linienschiffe in so hoher Zahl wie möglich.” In other words, Tirpitz uses arguments that are confusingly reminiscent of Mommsen’s: the fear of confinement (the few bases; section 4: it deals with the area between Helgoland and the Thames) creates a desire for more bases and a fleet. This applies to Rome as well as to Germany.

<sup>25</sup> The vision of Mommsen as a non-imperialist is found in Wucher (1968) 67; Wickert (1959–1980) 4.81–82; Baltrusch (2005). Hilton (2014) points out that Mommsen opposed the Boer War as an expression of British imperialism. However, as will become clear in this article, this was due to the fact it was an overseas expansion.

<sup>26</sup> Jansen (2005) 118.

<sup>27</sup> See Linderski (1995) 134.

Italy and the unification of Germany — here not least as a product of the wars of unification against Denmark, France and Austria — is anything other than expansion and imperialism. In both cases it is primarily, and not surprisingly, a matter of justification.

### **Mommsen as a Source: The Annexation of the Duchies**

Mommsen describes the period of Roman civil war in the Late Republic, which culminated in the victory of Augustus and the beginning of the principate, as follows: “Die verfassungsmäßigen Wege waren erschöpft” (RG 2.88). This is an interesting analysis by a constitutional scholar. The annexation of the duchies after 1864 can be seen in a similar light; since it was a matter of historical necessity, little things like law and justice could not stand in the way. Mommsen was above all a German (national) *Realpolitiker*. The German historian and historiographer Karl Christ explains it thus: “Mommsen setzte das Recht einer im Hegelschen Sinne für notwendig erachteten historischen Entwicklung so absolut, dass er es selbst unternahm, die Annexion Schleswig-Holsteins durch Preußen zu rechtfertigen.”<sup>28</sup> This *Realpolitik* is thus present in both Mommsen the ‘politician’ and Mommsen the ‘historian’.

The great Italian ancient historian, Arnaldo Momigliano, concludes in his chapter on Polybius and Posidonius: “If you want to understand Greece under the Romans, read Polybius and whatever you may believe to be Posidonius; if you want to understand Rome ruling Greece, read Plautus, Cato — and Mommsen.”<sup>29</sup> What is interesting here is the interaction between the ancient world, the nineteenth century, and today, connecting the different historiographical layers. To properly contextualise the scholarly consensus on Mommsen, we must also take account of the vigorous debates on Roman imperialism that re-emerged in the early 2000s with Arthur Eckstein’s work. While Harris emphasised internal Roman factors — such as ideology, elite ambition, and an inherently aggressive imperialism — Eckstein underscored systemic conditions, namely an anarchic interstate environment, which he argued gave rise to a form of defensive imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Christ (2021) 25.

<sup>29</sup> Momigliano (1971) 49.

<sup>30</sup> Challenges to Harris’s approach include Gruen (1984), Sherwin-White (1984), and Eckstein (2008) on Roman expansion in the Greek East. Eckstein (1987) argued that between 264 and 194 BCE the Romans were defensive imperialists, although individual generals could act aggressively. His 2006 study emphasised that the ancient Mediterranean was a violent anarchy. This perspective — drawing on International Relations (IR) Realism — has since been sharply criticised by Harris (2016). Harris’s

The current debate is largely centred on Harris, and scholars have too readily accepted his interpretation of Mommsen and the notion of defensive imperialism. It is essential to understand where Harris's reading of Mommsen originates, and here we cannot be satisfied with merely consulting ancient sources. Mommsen's magnum opus, the *Römische Geschichte*, had — and still has, or should have — enormous significance in this ongoing discussion. Yet scholars are not always fully aware of the origins of these debates and positions. In other words, fewer and fewer people read Mommsen today, and certainly even fewer do so in German.

Returning to the annexation of the duchies, in 1865, Mommsen wrote the above-mentioned political pamphlet to the voters of Halle (*Send-schreiben* in the sense of an official letter addressed to the public). In this, he reflected on the annexation of Schleswig and Holstein after the military victory of 1864 and its political consequences. Alfred Heuss describes in an excellent way how the pamphlet deals with everyday politics, and at the same time reflects Mommsen's deeper political thoughts.<sup>31</sup> According to Mommsen, the duchies were a natural part of Germany, and Prussia's annexation of Schleswig and Holstein was a step towards a unified German state. The pamphlet deals with geopolitics and strategy, including the securing of Germany's borders. Mommsen justifies the desire to annex the two duchies as follows (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 383):

Die Elbherzogtümer gebieten über die Mündung des wichtigsten deutschen Stromes; sie sind das Bindeglied zwischen der innern und der äußern deutschen See, der Schlüssel zum Weltmeer und zur Weltpolitik; und das alles ist ein totes Gut in ihrer eigenen Hand, in der Hand Preußens das Stammkapital der maritimen Zukunft der Nation. Die Elbherzogtümer sind ferner von hoher militärischer Wichtigkeit und dem Angriff vorzugsweise ausgesetzt, nicht bloß als erst neu-erlichst, und vielleicht nicht zum letztenmal, mit den Waffen den Ausländern entrissenes Gebiet, sondern auch in Folge der heutigen der Seeinvasion mehr und mehr sich zuwendenden Strategik; Deutschland wird keinen großen Krieg führen können, ohne sich der Elbmündung und der schleswig-holsteinischen Ostseehäfen versichert zu halten, und die Zeit des ewigen Friedens ist noch fern. Deutschland hat das Recht und also Preußen die Pflicht nicht schlechthin, aber in mili-

response in 2016 was, to put it mildly, strongly worded (42–43). For the current state of scholarship on Roman imperialism, see Burton (2019).

<sup>31</sup> Heuss (1956) 175: “politisches Denken”.

tärischer und maritimer Beziehung sich die Elbherzogtümer zu anektierten. Denn darüber wollen wir uns nicht täuschen: Annexion ist dies auch, nur eine partielle.

Mommsen is referring to the *Schleswig-Holsteinischer Kanal*. This waterway, now called the *Nord-Ostsee-Kanal* or the Kiel Canal, connects the North Sea with the Baltic Sea. The canal serves as a link between the inner and outer German waters and is the gateway to the world's oceans and politics, especially to what would become Germany's central naval base at Kiel (together with Wilhelmshaven). The area was to secure Germany's maritime future. The lessons of the lack of a navy in the Three Years' War are clear (see note 39).<sup>32</sup> *Weltpolitik* refers to Germany's overseas policy, which indicates a significant change in Mommsen's view of the German navy between 1865 and 1898. The most likely explanation for this change is Kaiser Wilhelm's ambition for, and Alfred von Tirpitz's influence on the growth of the German Navy.<sup>33</sup>

There is a clear resemblance to Rome, which was able to conquer the vital islands around Italy in the Tyrrhenian Sea only after building a fleet during the First Punic War. Without the duchies, Germany lacked the capacity to wage war outside its borders, just as Rome did. Without them, Germany could not defend itself. In the words of *Realpolitik* (*Die Annexion, in Reden und Aufsätze*, 382):

Diese gewaltsame Annexion also wollen wir um keinen Preis, denn wir dürfen sie nicht wollen. Das Gesagte aber bedarf einer Einschränkung. Die Sicherung der deutschen Grenze und der deutschen Meere kann nicht warten, bis das einige Deutschland fertig ist; ja man kann wohl sagen, wie nichts geschaffen werden kann als was gewissermaßen schon da ist, so ist für die Herstellung der formellen deutschen Einheit die Vorbedingung die Herstellung ihrer wichtigsten materiellen Konsequenzen.

Whether it is a just or a violent annexation, it is a necessity. The German navy is crucial to the future, and both its capacity and bases are located

<sup>32</sup> Mommsen had already mentioned in 1848 that Åbenrå might be used as a naval base (*Über Bunsens Memoir on the Constitutional Right of the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, Beilage zur Schleswig-Holsteinischen Zeitung* 9 May 1848; see Gehrcke (1927) 158–162, esp. 161)). A division of the duchies was therefore also rejected. The text contains some of the ideas that later became clear in the paper on the annexation of the duchies (1865). There is talk of 'natural borders' and naval bases. But there are also significant differences. See above.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted, however, that Mommsen had a positive view of the emperor (Wiedemann & Wang (1997) 69).

in the conquered territories. Access to the sea is vital. Mommsen, of course, refers to Schleswig as his ‘home’, and also mentions the Schleswig-Holstein diaspora (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 374). Law and power (the sword) are thus linked (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 375):

Es geht langsam im lieben Vaterlande. Wer da etwa meinte, daß die schleswig-holsteinische Frage in dem Augenblick gelöst sei, als endlich unser gutes Recht zu seinem Schwerte und unser gutes Schwert zu seinem Rechte kam, der hatte sich die deutsche Erbsünde der Gutmütigkeit noch nicht hinreichend abgewöhnt. Von den ohnmächtigen Anmaßungen der Engländer hat uns ein scharfes Wort, von den ohnmächtigen Übergriffen der Dänen ein scharfer Schlag befreit [...].<sup>34</sup>

The behaviour of the Danes is unsurprisingly the justification for the annexation. In many ways, however, it may be surprising how little cultural and linguistic ties play a role in the text. Mommsen’s main concern is about law and natural borders. He continues (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 386):

Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht ferner des schleswig-holsteinischen Volkes ist an sich vollkommen berechtigt; aber es ist kein unbedingtes, sondern findet seine Schranken an den allgemeinen Interessen der deutschen Nation.

Nothing is more important than the unification of Germany. There is no Schleswig-Holstein nation, or, rather, people, but only one German nation; “Denn es gibt eben kein schleswig-holsteinisches Volk, sondern nur ein deutsches und wo dieses spricht, hat jenes zu gehorchen.” (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 386).<sup>35</sup> In this context, it is interesting that Mommsen refers to the annexation as a “militärisch-maritime Annexion der Elbherzogtümer” (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*,

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 377 “den tückischen Neid Englands”. The Duchies have now been wrested from enemy hands (“Nun sind die den Fremden entrissenen Elbherzogtümer [...]” (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 375). *Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 381–382: “Nicht mit seinem Rechte hat Preußen in London die europäische Diplomatie aus dem Felde geschlagen; nicht für Vorschubierung der schwarzweißen Grenzpfähle glaubten unsere jungen Leute zu sterben, die in Schleswig die dänische Kugel traf.”

<sup>35</sup> Mommsen generally supports the right to self-determination, but not in this case. Here it is about the right and duty to annex (Jansen (2005) 116). Jansen (2005) 118 concludes that Mommsen’s nationalism never became militaristic. This point is open to debate; however, it should also be noted that it was imperialistic in nature.

394). This is further elaborated towards the end of the text: “diese praktische Geltendmachung seines Berufes Deutschlands Grenzen und Deutschlands Meere zu verteidigen.” (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 399).

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the text is that the last sentence does not reference legality, but focuses on patriotism: “die diese Angelegenheit nicht vom legitimistischen, sondern vom patriotischen Standpunkt betrachten.” (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 401). The annexation aimed to secure access to the world’s oceans by securing Germany’s northern border (*Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 386). This could not depend on the goodwill of the duchies, as outlined above on self-determination.

Where does this leave us? The debate surrounding the future of the duchies, which intensified in late 1863, engaged prominent historians such as Droysen, Georg Waitz, Heinrich Schaefer, Heinrich von Sybel, Ludwig Häusser, and Heinrich von Treitschke. Mommsen’s 1865 pamphlet, *Die Annexion Schleswig-Holsteins: ein Sendschreiben an die Wahlmänner der Stadt Halle und des Saalkreises*, should be understood as a political intervention in this broader discourse, rather than as a philosophical treatise on history. It articulates a clear position: Germany’s security and geostrategic interests must take absolute precedence. That said, the arguments and conceptual language employed in the pamphlet bear a striking resemblance to those found in *Römische Geschichte*. In both works, Mommsen’s understanding of ‘imperialism’ reflects a consistent vision — one grounded in national consolidation and historical necessity (see further below).

## The Roman and Imperial German Navy

In 1898, towards the end of his life, Mommsen shared his thoughts on the Imperial German Navy in a newspaper interview:<sup>36</sup>

[...] Übrigens ist unsere auswärtige Politik in guten Händen. Ich habe von Bülow’s Begabung die höchste Meinung. Ich würde mich herzlich freuen, wenn dieser staatskluge, feingebildete und aufgeklärte Mann einst berufen wäre, das Ruder in Deutschland in die Hand zu nehmen. Durch seine Reden im Reichstage hat er sich bei dem deutschen Volke ausgezeichnet eingeführt. Seit Bismarck hat man nicht mehr so staatsmännisch sprechen gehört. [...] Um offen zu sein, ich meine, für

<sup>36</sup> Wickert (1959–1980) 4.77; Mommsen, interview 6/8/1898, *Neue Freie Presse* Nr. 12.199, Wien 9/1898.

uns ist die Marine nur Sport. Ich sage also: Die Marinepläne sind Sport, nicht etwa Dummheit. Wir brauchen die Marine, um für unsere überseeischen Handelsinteressen zu demonstrieren. Also einen demonstrativen Charakter soll unsere Marine haben, aber Weltoberung steht unserem Sinnen fern. Eine Flagge brauchen wir auf den Meeren — es ist aber recht gleichgültig, wie viel Kanonen dahinter stecken.

Jürgen Malitz (1988) claims the interview shows that Mommsen was against the German navy. But let us start looking at his attitude to the Roman navy. He certainly was not negative towards the Roman navy, which is often mentioned in the *Römische Geschichte*, most prominently in the first volume. Mommsen is aware the navy consists not only of ships but also of infrastructure, such as ports, as mentioned in the previous section on the annexation of the duchies by Preussen. We can therefore follow Mommsen's view of the navy in general, from the positive expression in the *Römische Geschichte* and the 1865 paper on the annexation, to the more reserved comment in the 1898 interview.

Turning to ancient Rome, Polybius points out that the navy was a crucial necessity for the Romans, especially from a geostrategic perspective:

[5] οὐ μὴν ἀγνοοῦντες γε τούτων οὐδέν, θεωροῦντες δὲ τοὺς Καρχηδονίους οὐ μόνον τὰ κατὰ τὴν Λιβύην, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς Ἰβηρίας ὑπέρκοα πολλὰ μέρη πεποιημένους, ἔτι δὲ τῶν νήσων ἀπασῶν ἐγκρατεῖς ὑπάρχοντας τῶν κατὰ τὸ Σαρδόνιον καὶ Τυρρηνικὸν πέλαγος, ἥγωνίων, εἰ Σικελίας ἔτι κυριεύσαιεν, [6] μὴ λίαν βαρεῖς καὶ φοβεροὶ γείτονες αὐτοῖς ὑπάρχοιεν, κύκλῳ σφᾶς περιέχοντες καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς τῆς Ἰταλίας μέρεσιν ἐπικείμενοι. [7] διότι δὲ ταχέως ὑφ' αὐτοὺς ποιήσονται τὴν Σικελίαν, μὴ τυχόντων ἐπικουρίας τῶν Μαμερτίνων, προφανὲς ἦν. [8] κρατήσαντες γὰρ ἐγχειριζομένης αὐτοῖς τῆς Μεσσήνης ἔμελλον ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ τὰς Συρακούσας ἐπανελέσθαι διὰ τὸ πάσης σχεδὸν δεσπόζειν τῆς ἄλλης Σικελίας. [9] ὃ προορώμενοι Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ νομίζοντες ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι σφίσι τὸ μὴ προέσθαι τὴν Μεσσήνην μηδὲ ἔασαι Καρχηδονίους οίονεὶ γεφυρώσαι τὴν εἰς Ἰταλίαν αὐτοῖς διάβασιν [...].

But fully aware as they were of this, they yet saw that the Carthaginians had not only reduced Libya to subjection, but a great part of Spain besides, and that they were also in possession of all the islands in the Sardinian and Tyrrhenian Seas.<sup>6</sup> They were therefore in great apprehension lest, if they also became masters of Sicily, they would be most troublesome and dangerous neighbours, hemming them in on all sides and threatening every part of Italy.<sup>7</sup> That they would soon be supreme in Sicily, if the Mamertines were not helped, was evident; for once Messene had fallen into their hands,<sup>8</sup> they would shortly subdue Syracuse also, as they were absolute lords of almost all the rest of Sicily.

9 The Romans, foreseeing this and viewing it as a necessity for themselves not to abandon Messene and thus allow the Carthaginians as it were to build a bridge for crossing over to Italy, debated the matter for long [...].<sup>37</sup>

Cassius Dio (Dio frg 43.1–4, on the origins of the war, and 43.17 on the building of the navy; Zonar. 8.8–15) says something similar three hundred years later, although he clearly drew on the same source tradition. The reasons for the conflict are outlined, but at the same time Dio explains that winning Sicily as a base to better dominate Carthage was the major aim (frg. 43.17, Sicily as the main prize of the war; cf. Polyb. 1.20.1–2). The description of the hidden cause of the war is based on Thucydides' famous description of the Peloponnesian War (1.23.6). Thucydides describes the inevitable rivalry between the dominant and rising powers due to the imbalance of power between Sparta and Athens, now often called 'Thucydides trap', where the rising power threatens to displace the dominant power. The Peloponnesian War was caused by Sparta's fear of the rising power of Athens.<sup>38</sup> Following the victory at Agrigentum — or perhaps even earlier — Rome recognised that a fleet was essential to defeat Carthage (Polyb. 1.17).

Returning to Mommsen, the historical significance of the navy is a question of the lessons of history, and not just contemporary history inscribed in the analysis of the past. It is the history of Rome, but also the lessons of the Three Years' War.<sup>39</sup> When Mommsen wrote his *Römische Geschichte*, he fully agreed with Polybius that the navy was a positive and necessary part of the state. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that in a late interview he did not seem to want to transfer these ideas to Germany in 1898, as he was more than willing to do in 1865. In other words, it may seem strange that Mommsen was not one of the so-called *Flottenprofessoren*; a group of academics who supported and promoted naval construction and maritime policy in the period before the First World

<sup>37</sup> 1.10.5–9; trans. from Loeb Classical Library; see Lange (2021).

<sup>38</sup> See Allison (2017).

<sup>39</sup> See Rahn (2017) and Kroener (2005) 83. The German navy was created because of the war against Denmark, but it can hardly be described as a real navy. The most important lesson of the Three Years' War was that without a navy it is difficult to defeat an opponent like Denmark, which can entrench itself on islands. This is reminiscent of Mommsen's reading of the First Punic War. Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica were part of Italy's natural borders. The First Punic War and the conquest of Sicily are cited by scholars as the beginning of overseas expansion, but not by Mommsen.

War. Academics in this group include Max Weber, Hans Delbrück and von Treitschke, but not Theodor Mommsen.<sup>40</sup>

The reason for Mommsen's absence from the list is mainly about the navy as a strategic power tool. According to Mommsen, the Roman expansion after the Second Punic War ended in a negative way. The same may be true of the unified German state. In the Annexation pamphlet, it is clearly opportune to conquer land in order to expand Germany to its natural borders, and therefore it makes sense to have a navy. However, the pamphlet emphasises that it should not be used to conquer overseas territories, but to defend the state. In other words, Mommsen transferred his analyses of the history of Rome to Germany, using the past as a guideline for understanding German history. Mommsen, who is also a source for the German naval build-up after the 1898 decision (the Tirpitz's memorandum), uses the knowledge and sources of the Roman past to shape the view of his own time. In this case, we can rightly speak of learning from history.

Otherwise, quotes from the *Römische Geschichte* could easily lead one to believe that Mommsen was a naval professor: "Der Flottenbau der Römer war eben gar nichts als großartiges Nationalwerk, wo durch Einsicht in das Nötige und Mögliche, durch geniale Erfindsamkeit, durch Energie in Entschluss und Ausführung das Vaterland aus einer Lage gerissen ward, die übler war, als die zunächst schien." (1.519). And, adding to this: "Dennoch ist das römische Flottenwesen in seiner unbehilflichen Großartigkeit noch die genialste Schöpfung dieses Krieges und hat wie im Anfang so zuletzt für Rom den Ausschlag gegeben." (1.538).

It is therefore not correct to say that Mommsen was against the German navy or expansionist policy as such. On the contrary in fact, but he was against its use for world domination. The 1898 interview was conducted shortly after the Reichstag had passed the first naval law on 10 April of that year (construction of 19 battleships, Tirpitz's memorandum, section 14). Mommsen was positive about the Roman and German navies, and it was acceptable to conquer the duchies of the Danish king, especially due to their ports.

## Roman Imperialism

It is time to pull the pieces together. In 1979, William Harris published *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome*, which marked a significant shift in the study of Roman imperialism. Harris challenges the tradition that the aforementioned consensus attributes to Mommsen. In contrast

<sup>40</sup> See Marienfeld (1957).

to ‘defensive imperialism’, Harris describes Rome’s expansion as aggressive and offensive. Harris writes: “For Mommsen (as for many of his followers) there was little need for explanation, since he regarded Roman foreign policy as fundamentally defensive.”<sup>41</sup>

John North, in a fine critique of Harris that also acknowledges the book’s considerable importance, observes: “The major achievement of *War and Imperialism* is surely that it makes this view virtually untenable”<sup>42</sup> — but then qualifies this with the remark, “in the form in which I have stated it [= defensive imperialism]”. North goes on to note: “at the very least, defensive imperialism will need to be re-stated in a new form to deal with Harris’ critique.” This re-formulation did indeed occur, with scholars such as North himself, John Rich (1993), and Eckstein (esp. 2006) recognising that wars “begin from complex situations, in which aggression, mutual fear, confusion, accident, bad communications, personal and political ambitions and many other factors play a part.”<sup>43</sup> Roman warfare was sometimes defensive, though certainly not invariably so. North concludes: “The real achievement of Harris’ book should be to settle once and for all the question of whether Rome’s wars were aggressive or defensive, ...”<sup>44</sup>

That may be so, but the principal problem lies elsewhere: in the misrepresentation — by Harris and, in this instance, North — of Mommsen (and Frank).<sup>45</sup> As a consequence of his desire to pigeonhole divergent views, Harris misunderstands Mommsen to be talking about ‘defensive imperialism’ — a term he, as noted, never uses directly — when he is actually talking about ‘strategy’. Harris adds:<sup>46</sup> “According to Mommsen (*RG* ii(12). 544) the aim was the security of Italy, but he does not explain why this, rather than the other advantages he encounters, should be considered the essential reason for seizing Sardinia and Corsica.” The lack of context is a problem for Harris. First, he misunderstands Mommsen’s interpretation of Roman expansion. As a result,

<sup>41</sup> Harris (1979) 132; see also 162, note 1. Burton’s (2019) summary of the scholarship on Roman imperialism is, in many ways, typical of contemporary views on the historiography of imperialism. He begins with Frank (1914) and writes: “[e]xplicitly taking his cue from Mommsen, Frank puts forward a thesis of Roman defensive imperialism” (3). No reference is made to the works of Mommsen.

<sup>42</sup> North (1981) 1.

<sup>43</sup> See North (1981) 2.

<sup>44</sup> North (1981) 9.

<sup>45</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 206 correctly points out that the concept of ‘defensive imperialism’ attributed to Mommsen (and Tenney Frank) was created by their “opponents”, including Howard Scullard and William Harris.

<sup>46</sup> Harris (1979) 193 n. 2.

he also misconstrues the reason for the conquest of the Tyrrhenian islands. For Mommsen, it was a matter of historical necessity and natural boundaries, especially because of geostrategic access to the sea. If Carthage had conquered Sicily, it would have controlled all the islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The result would have been the encirclement of Rome, which would have been both a commercial and military disaster. Mommsen clearly accepted Roman imperialism until the turning point, the Second Punic War.

A similarly problematic account of Mommsen's view of imperialism can be found in Baltrusch's article *Mommsen und der Imperialismus* (2005). On the basis of the interview conducted in 1898, Baltrusch concludes that Mommsen did not agree with the world-political ambitions but accepts that Mommsen believed wars of consolidation might be necessary.<sup>47</sup> Baltrusch continues: "Denn die geschichtliche Notwendigkeit war im naturgesetzlichen Sinne war mit der Einigung Italiens erfüllt, weil Mommsen darin die nationale Aufgabe erblicke."<sup>48</sup> Sicily is an exception, as Mommsen sees the island as part of Italy and its natural borders, and therefore its conquest is not a result of imperialism.<sup>49</sup> Baltrusch concludes that Mommsen's criticism of the Imperial German Navy is tantamount to an opposition to both *Weltoberung* and expansion.<sup>50</sup> According to Baltrusch, Mommsen criticises imperialism in general:<sup>51</sup>

Mommsens Kritik am Imperialismus können wie in seiner historischen Arbeit am besten natürlich in der auch unter pädagogischer Absicht verfaßten „Römischen Geschichte“ —, aber auch in seinen öffentlichen und politischen Äußerungen deutlich erkennen.

What can be called 'imperialism' may seem a mere question of terminology, but the unification of Italy under Rome and the unification of Germany — including the conquest of the duchies — cannot be described as anything other than instances of imperialism. Baltrusch simplifies Mommsen's arguments and neglects the lessons of 1848, the Three Years' War, and 1864. Mommsen is concerned with historical necessity, but also with geostrategy and access to the sea through ports. The idea of

<sup>47</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 204.

<sup>48</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 207.

<sup>49</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 208.

<sup>50</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 218.

<sup>51</sup> Baltrusch (2005) 220.

Mommsen as an anti-imperialist must therefore be rejected or at least contextualised.

### The Tyrrhenian Sea and the Fear of Further Expansion

The final link in this assessment of Mommsen's view of imperialism is the islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea, or, indirectly, the sea between Helgoland and the Thames. The *RG* contains a review of Carthage's geostrategic encirclement of Rome; Sardinia is already Punic, and it is feared that Sicily will also become Punic (1.494).<sup>52</sup> Mommsen sums up his thoughts with great precision and geostrategic deftness (*RG* 1.544): "Seit sie die drei großen Eilande besaß, konnte die Eidgenossenschaft das Tyrrhenische Meer das ihrige nennen." He does not use the term 'strategy' here (see, however, *Die Annexion*, in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 382),<sup>53</sup> but considers the matter of making the Tyrrhenian Sea a Roman sea (cf. Polybius, above).<sup>54</sup> All was not well, however (*RG* 1.512):

Aber wichtiger war es, daß man mit dem Überschreiten der See abwich von der bisherigen rein italischen und rein kontinentalen Politik; man gab das System auf, durch welches die Väter Roms Größe gegründet hatten, um ein anderes zu erwählen, dessen Ergebnisse vorherzusagen niemand vermochte. Es war einer der Augenblicke, wo die Berechnung aufhört und wo der Glaube an den eigenen Stern und an den Stern des Vaterlandes allein den Mut gibt, die Hand zu fassen, die aus dem Dunkel der Zukunft winkt, und ihr zu folgen, es weiß keiner wohin.

<sup>52</sup> The Chinese officer (PLA) Xu Qiyu (2017) views imperial Germany in the same way Mommsen views ancient Rome. The strategic circumstances between the periods are similar. Rome, Germany, and China fear being trapped by Carthage, Britain, and the United States and its allies, respectively.

<sup>53</sup> Heuser (2010) 3 defines strategy as follows: "[...] the link between political aims and the use of force, or its threat." Gaddis (2018) 21 adds: "the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities."

<sup>54</sup> For the great naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, Mommsen's reading of the First Punic War was of great interest. Mahan writes in *The Influence of Sea Power 1660–1783* (1894) 15: "At the beginning of the war [Second Punic War], Mommsen says, Rome controlled the seas. To whatever cause, or combination of causes, it be attributed, this essentially non-maritime state had in the first Punic War established over the seafaring rival a naval supremacy which still lasted." Mahan's book was translated into German in 1896 at the request of Wilhelm II, and 8,000 copies were distributed in connection with the attempt to gain support for the first Naval Act of 1898. See Herwig (2005) 130. *The Influence of Sea Power on the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892) is also available in a German edition (1897).

After the conquest of Italy and the islands, Roman expansion entered a new phase. According to Mommsen, this phase was less positive, and the fear of an uncertain future is evident in his text. Mommsen continues (1.512): “Die Eroberung Italiens gab den Römern, wie die Griechenlands den Makedoniern, wie die Schlesiens den Preußen, den Mut, eine neue politische Bahn zu betreten.” This describes a positive development in terms of internal affairs: Italy for Rome, Greece for Macedonia, and Silesia for Prussia. But the seeds of trouble are sown in this urge of necessity.

The decisive turning point is the Second Punic War (*RG* 1.660): “Vor diesem Krieg [Hannibal] hatte Rom sein politisches Ziel nicht höher gesteckt als bis zu der Beherrschung des Festlandes der italischen Halbinseln innerhalb ihrer natürlichen Grenzen und der italischen Inseln und Meere.” At first sight, it may seem surprising that it is the Second Punic War, and not the First, described as the great turning point. This is because the First Punic War concerns Sicily, which Mommsen considers to be part of Rome’s natural borders. The Second Punic War takes the Romans to Africa and Spain, thus initiating what he calls ‘overseas expansion’. Mommsen adds (*RG* 1.661):

Die Herrschaft über Italien haben die Römer errungen, weil sie sie erstrebt haben; die Hegemonie und die daraus entwickelte Herrschaft über das Mittelmeergebiet ist ihnen gewissermaßen ohne ihre Absicht durch die Verhältnisse zugeworfen worden.

The quotation demonstrates that the term ‘defensive imperialism’ may after all be applicable to Mommsen’s worldview but only with reservations. The phrase “erstrebt haben” — whether out of necessity or not — signifies expansion, and consequently, imperialism. The crucial point here is that Mommsen reads the past in a specific way, which becomes visible again after 1864 and especially after 1898. The year 1898 is therefore a turning point — a process that may have begun with Bismarck’s dismissal by Wilhelm II —, because it marks the beginning of Germany’s tendency to potentially expand beyond its natural borders. Reaching these natural borders is a historical necessity and therefore justified. The two phases of Roman expansion are clearly visible in the *RG* (3.222):

Als der römischen Bürgerschaft die alte Heimat zu eng geworden war und sie in Gefahr stand zu verkümmern, rettete die italische Eroberungspolitik des Senats dieselbe vom Untergang. Jetzt war auch die Italische Heimat wieder zu eng geworden; wieder siechte der Staat an

denselben gleichen Art, nur in größeren Verhältnissen sich wiederholende sozialen Mißständen. Es war ein genialer Gedanke, eine großartige Hoffnung, welche Caesar über die Alpen führte: der Gedanke und die Zuversicht, dort seinen Mitbürgern eine neue, grenzenlosen Heimat zu gewinnen und den Staat zum zweitenmal dadurch zu regenerieren, dass er auf eine breitere Basis gestellt ward.

Of the two phases, the first is positive, while the second has a negative effect on Rome. This is the lesson of history! We come back to natural borders (*RG* 3.258–259):

In seiner besseren Zeit hatte der Senat nicht geruht, bis Rome Herrschaft Italiens natürliche Grenzen, die Alpen und das Mittelmeer und dessen nächste Inseln, erreicht hatte. Einer ähnlichen militärischen Abrundung bedurfte auch das erweiterte Reich; aber die gegenwärtige Regierung überließ dieselbe dem Zufall und sah höchstens darauf, nicht die Grenzen verteidigt werden konnten, sondern dass sie nicht unmittelbar von ihr selbst verteidigt zu werden brauchten. Man fühlte es, daß jetzt ein anderer Geist und ein anderer Arm die Geschichte Rome zu lenken begann.

The circle is now complete. The last two quotes explain not only Mommsen's view of the two phases of Roman expansion, but also his view of the conquest and annexation of the duchies, and notably his opposition to Tirpitz's and Kaiser Wilhelm's plans for the oceangoing Imperial Fleet.

## Summary

Stefan Rebenich summarises Mommsen's use of history in the following terms:<sup>55</sup> “Mommsen schilderte die politische Geschichte Rom von den Anfängen bis zum Untergang der Republik mit dem Herzblut des aufrechten Liberalen, der das Scheitern der Revolution von 1848 historiographisch kompensierte. Die politischen Auseinandersetzungen der Zeit verlegte er in den römischen Senat.”<sup>56</sup> This summation is not wrong,

<sup>55</sup> Rebenich (2005a) 151.

<sup>56</sup> Rebenich (2005b) 28: “Unmittelbar nach dem Scheitern der Revolution entdeckte Mommsen – wie Droysen und Gervinus – die Historiographie als politisches Medium. Sie war ihm ein geeignetes Mittel, politische Ansichten einem breiten Publikum zu kommunizieren. Politische Werturteile und historische Kategorien wurden neu aufeinander bezogen. Also beeinflußte die 48er Revolution auch Mommsens Geschichtsschreibung, beeinflußte seine dreibändige „Römische Geschichte.“” For better or worse, yes, but even when Mommsen takes a position, it

but the process, as this article has illustrated, concerns both learning about the past, and using the present to describe the past. This process is made clear in *Römische Geschichte*, but even more so in the Annexation pamphlet and the interview about the German Imperial Fleet.

In Rome, overseas expansion beyond Rome's natural borders leads to civil war and the crisis of the Late Republic. In Germany, Mommsen fears a similar development after the decision to build a huge imperial navy, not least a possible war with Britain. However, it is very unclear how this can be described as an anti-imperialist stance. At any rate, the views of Harris, Baltrusch, and others on Mommsen and imperialism need to be nuanced.

What Mommsen described in terms of *Realpolitik* as "unification" was in fact a form of traditional aggressive imperialism. In modern conceptual terms, applying the label 'defensive' here would be problematic. It is by accepting the conflation of 'unification' with 'defensive imperialism' that modern scholars have been misled. Both the non-Roman communities within ancient Italy and, by analogy, Denmark in 1864–65 would likely contest such a characterisation. The expansion of Roman power across Italy laid the groundwork for a world empire, marking its first phase. Mommsen regarded expansion up to these natural frontiers as legitimate; any advance beyond them, however, he considered perilous, likely to provoke internal instability and external conflict. There was no defensive imperialism, only unification — yet the fact remains that this was, indeed, imperialism.

It was acceptable to conquer the duchies and defeat Denmark in the 1864 war because of the objective to access the sea and Germany's natural borders. This war was about historical necessity. Something similar had happened in ancient Rome with the unification of Italy. The experience of Rome, however, also demonstrated that any further expansion beyond these borders risked dangerous overstretch. That is the only reason Mommsen was against naval armament in 1898! The problem was not the navy itself, but the creation of a *Hochseeflotte* to resist or challenge Britain. We can therefore conclude that Mommsen had a very flexible view of the nature of imperialism. He accepted imperialism and expansion as part of the unification of Germany (and Rome), but only within natural limits. This was mainly fuelled by fear of the negative

remains an excellent analysis of the Roman past. His work thus manages to combine personal opinion with a thorough and nuanced historical account. Even if describing it as one of the principal novelties may be somewhat overstated, Struck (2001, 105) is certainly right to emphasise that "[i]nterest in the concept of revolution was one of the chief novelties of the *Römische Geschichte*."

consequences of overseas expansion for national unity, and the risk of a possible civil war, as happened in Rome.

Mommsen expresses his personal view of the state and development of the world in his 1881 speech on the occasion of the emperor's birthday: "Wir brauchen nicht den Krieg, seit wir unsere Grenzen [read: natural borders] gewonnen haben, aber wir brauchen die Kriegsrüstung und den Kriegsherrn" (*Reden und Aufsätze*, 107). The same speech also contains the following *realpolitisch* commentary (106): "[D]er ewige Friede ist unter allen Umständen nicht bloß ein Traum, den heute auch Kant nicht träumen würde, sondern nicht einmal zu wünschen." It was Rome's destiny to unite Italy, but a defensive policy led to Rome also conquering the Mediterranean world. In the case of Germany, Mommsen wanted to stop expansion after unification within its natural borders, but he was unsurprisingly prepared to defend the state against its enemies. In a letter of 30 October 1870, he describes the possible consequences of a war against France:<sup>57</sup>

Der grauenvolle Ruin Frankreichs, bei dem wir die leidige Henkerrolle zu verrichten haben, ist ein Ärmerwerden auch für uns, die wir nun allein bleiben; und unsere innere Entwicklung wird es auch merken, daß die Nation sich durch die philisterhafte Furcht vor dem unbehagmen Nachbarn ins Erobern hineinhetzen läßt.

In other words, Mommsen feared that Germany would end up like Rome...

Carsten Hjort Lange  
*Aalborg University*  
 lange@society.aau.dk

<sup>57</sup> See Wickert (1959–1980) 4.67; cf. 66.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allison, G. (2017) *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Melbourne & London: Scribe.

Badian, E. (1968) *Roman Imperialism in the Late Republic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Baltrusch, E. (2005) 'Mommsen und der Imperialismus', in Demandt, Goltz and Schlangen-Schöning (2005), 201–225.

Barber, C. M (2022) *Politics in the Roman Republic: Perspectives from Niebuhr to Gelzer*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Burton, P. J. (2019) *Roman Imperialism*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Christ, K. (2021) 'Theodor Mommsen und die "Römische Geschichte"', in Mommsen (2021) vol. 3, book 8, 7–66.

Clark, C. (2023) *Revolutionary Spring. Fighting for a New World 1848–1849*. London: Allen Lane.

Demandt, A., Goltz, A., and Schlangen-Schöning, H. (eds.) (2005) *Theodor Mommsen Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Droysen, J. G. (1836–1843) *Geschichte des Hellenismus*. Hamburg: Pertes-Besser und Mauke.

Droysen, J. G. and Samwer, K. (1850) *Die Herzogthümer Schleswig-Holstein und das Königreich Dänemark: actenmässige Geschichte der dänischen Politik seit dem Jahre 1806*. Hamburg: Pertes-Besser und Mauke.

Eckstein, A. M. (1987) *Senate and General: Individual Decision Making and Roman Foreign Relations, 264–194 B.C.* Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

Eckstein, A. M. (2006) *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

Eckstein, A. M. (2008) *Rome Enters the Greek East: From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230–170 BC*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Engberg-Pedersen, A. (2015) *Empire of Chance*. Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press.

Frank, T. (1914) *Roman Imperialism*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Gaddis, J. L. (2018) *On Grand Strategy*. London: Allen Lane.

Gehrcke, C. (1927) *Theodor Mommsen als schleswig-holsteinischer Publizist*. Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt.

Gruen, E. S. (1984) *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, vol. 1 and 2. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

Hammond, M. (1948) 'Ancient Imperialism: Contemporary Justifications', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 58/59: 105–161.

Harris, W. V. (1979) *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327–70 BC*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harris, W. V. (2016) *Roman Power: A Thousand Years of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herwig, H. H (2005) ‘Der Einfluß von Alfred Th. Mahan auf die deutsche Seemacht’, in Rahn (2005), 127–142.

Heuser, B. (2010) *The Evolution of Strategy. Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heuss, A. (1956) *Theodor Mommsen und das 19. Jahrhundert*. Kiel: Ferdinand Hirt.

Hilton, J. L. (2014) ‘Theodor Mommsen and the Liberal Opposition to British Imperialism at the Time of the Second South African War of Independence (1899–1902)’, *Classical Receptions Journal* 6/1: 48–73.

Holleaux, M. (1921) *Rome, la Grèce Et les Monarchies Hellénistiques au IIe Siècle Avant J.-C. (273–205)*. Athens: École française d’Athènes.

Immerwahr, D. (2019) *How to Hide an Empire. A Short History of the Greater United States*. London: The Bodley Head.

Jansen, C. (2005) ‘Volk – Nation – Recht. Theodor Mommsen als engagierter Bürger, Liberaler und Nationalist’, in Wiesenhöfer (2005), 97–120.

Jessen-Klingenberg, M. (2005) “Die Fürsten sind im Preise Gesunken” Politische Urteile und Forderungen Theodor Mommsens im Revolutionsjahr 1848’, in Wiesenhöfer (2005), 121–136.

Kroener, B. R. (2005) ‘Die deutsche Flotte 1848/49 – “das Schmerzenskind”’, in Rahn (2005), 81–90.

Lange, C. H. (2021) ‘Sea Power, Roman’, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8752>

Linderski, J. (1995) ‘SI VIS PACEM, PARA BELLUM: Concepts of Defensive Imperialism’, in J. Linderski, *Roman Questions: Selected Papers*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1–31.

Madvig, J. N. (1887) *Livserindringer*. København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag.

Mahan, A. T. (1894, first edition 1890) *The Influence of Sea Power 1660–1783*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington.

Mahan, A. T. (1896) *Der Einfluß der Seemacht auf die Geschichte 1660–1783*. Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn.

Malitz, J. (1988) “Ich wünschte ein Bürger zu sein”. Theodor Mommsen im wilhelminischen Reich’, in K. Christ and A. Momigliano (eds.), *Die Antike im 19. Jahrhundert in Italien und Deutschland*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 321–359.

Marienfeld, W. (1957) *Wissenschaft und Schlachtflossenbau in Deutschland 1897–1906*. Berlin & Frankfurt am Main: Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn.

Momigliano, A. (1971) *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marquard, E. (1930) ‘Theodor Mommsen. En Ansøgning’, *Personalhistorisk Tidsskrift*, 51(9-III): 216–219.

Mommsen, T. (1865) *Die Annexion Schleswig-Holsteins: ein Sendschreiben an die Wahlmänner der Stadt Halle und des Saalkreises*. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.

Mommsen, T. (1871–1888) *Römisches Staatsrecht I–V*. Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel.

Mommsen, T. (1905) *Reden und Aufsätze*. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.

Mommsen T. (1992) *Römische Kaisergeschichte. Herausgegeben von Barbara und Alexander Demandt*. München: C.H. Beck.

Mommsen, T. (2021) *Römische Geschichte I–III*, V. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Nippel, W. (2005) ‘Der „antiquarische Bauplatz“’. Theodor Mommsens „Römisches Staatsrecht“, in Wiesenhöfer (2005), 165–184.

Nippel, W. (2008) *Johan Gustav Droysen: Ein Leben zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.

Nippel, W. (2017) ‘Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903)’, in W. Nippel (ed.), *Wenn Toren aus der Geschichte falsche Schlüsse ziehen: Ein Theodor-Mommsen-Lesebuch*. München: dtv, 9–67.

North, J. (1981) ‘The Development of Roman Imperialism’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 71: 1–9.

Poulsen, F. (1946) *Liv og Rejser omkring Århundredeskiftet*. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag.

Qiyu, X. (2017) *Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871–1914*. Cambridge Mass. & London: The MIT Press.

Rahn, W. (ed.) (2005) *Deutsche Marinien im Wandel*. München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag.

Rahn, W. (2017) ‘German Navies from 1848 to 2016: Their Development and Courses from Confrontation to Cooperation’, *Naval War College Review* 70/4: 12–47.

Rebenich, S. (2002) *Theodor Mommsen. Eine Biographie*. München: C.H. Beck.

Rebenich, S. (2005a) ‘Die Mommsens’, in V. Reinhardt (ed.), *Deutsche Familien. Historische Porträts von Bismarck bis Weizsäcker*. München: C.H. Beck, 147–179.

Rebenich, S. (2005b) ‘Theodor Mommsen, die deutschen Professoren und die Revolution von 1848’, in Demandt et al. (2005), 13–35.

Rebenich, S. (2022) ‘Theodor Mommsen’s History of Rome and Its Political and Intellectual Context’, in V. Arena and J. Prag (eds.), *A Companion to the Political Culture of the Roman Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 81–92.

Rich, J. W. (1993) ‘Fear, Greed and Glory: the Causes of the Roman War-Making in the Middle Republic’, in J. W. Rich and G. Shipley (eds.), *War and Society in the Roman World*. London & New York: Routledge, 38–68.

Sahlins, P. (1990) “Natural Frontiers Revisited: France’s Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century”, *The American Historical Review* 95/5: 1423–1451.

Sherwin-White, A. N. (1984) *Roman Foreign Policy in the East, 168 B.C. to A.D. 1*. London: Duckworth.

Skydsgaard, J. E. (1997) ‘Theodor Mommsens romerske kejserhistorie’, *Historisk tidsskrift* 97/2: 305–312.

Steinberg, J. (1965) *Yesterday’s Deterrent. Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet*. London: MacDonald.

Struck, M. (2001) 'The Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation and Hermann the German', in R. Hingley (ed.), *Images of Rome: Perceptions of Ancient Rome in Europe and the United States in the Modern Age, JRA Suppl.* 40. Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 91–112

Ussing, J. L. (1906) *Af Mit Levned. Udgivet af hans sønner*. København & Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag.

Wickert, L. (1959–1980) *Theodor Mommsen. Eine Biographie*, Bde. 1–4. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.

Wiedemann, T. and Wang, N. (1997) 'Mommsen's Roman History', *Histos* 1: 67–81.

Wiesenhöfer, J. (ed.) (2005) *Theodor Mommsen: Gelehrter, Politiker und Literat*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Wucher, A. (1968) *Theodor Mommsen. Geschichtsschreibung und Politik*. Göttingen, Zurich, Berlin, Frankfurt: Musterschmidt.