Universität Potsdam

Universitätsverlag Potsdam

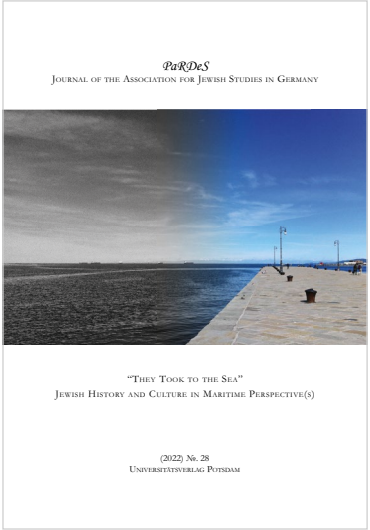
Article published in:

Björn Siegel, Markus Krah, Oskar Czendze (Eds.)

"They Took to the Sea": Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)

PaRDeS : Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany, Vol. 28

2023 – 153 pages
ISBN 978-3-86956-552-1
DOI https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-57347



Suggested citation:
Jessica Cooperman: Mark Wortman, Admiral Hyman Rickover: Engineer of Power (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 328 pp., $ 26.00. PaRDeS 28 (2022), S. 137–140.
DOI https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-58594

Mark Wortman, Admiral Hyman Rickover: Engineer of Power (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 328 pp., $ 26.00.

Hyman George Rickover may no longer be a household name, but Mark Wortman's highly readable new biography makes a good case for why perhaps he should be. The book presents a generally flattering portrait of the irascible Admiral Rickover and his fight to modernize the U.S. Navy and convert its ships to nuclear power. But as the double-meaning of the title suggests, it also chronicles Rickover's deftly engineered path to a position of remarkable personal power within the Navy and in American society. In doing so, Wortman gives readers a compelling window into the human politics and personalities that drove the U.S.–Soviet nuclear arms race during the Cold War and shaped late 20th century American military culture.

Born Chaim Godalia Rykower in 1899, "Rick" immigrated from Russia-Poland as a child. His parents, Abraham and Ruchia, and their three young children settled in the suburbs of Chicago. There, according to Wortman, young Chaim Americanized his name, excelled at school, and through a

combination of unshakable determination, hard work, and a job delivering Western Union telegrams to the office of U.S. Representative Adolph Sabath, managed to secure a position in the Naval Academy's class of 1922. He was a diligent although not outstanding midshipman, but as a young officer, Rickover demonstrated a passion for technology. The Navy sent him to pursue advanced training in electrical engineering, and as the military geared up for World War II, it appointed Rickover to the Electrical Section at the Bureau of Ships, where he honed his talent for leadership and his unwavering insistence upon technological excellence and ruthless efficiency. At the end of the war, Rickover maneuvered himself to the helm of the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ships Nuclear Propulsion Program and the Atomic Energy Commission Division of Naval Reactors – known simply as Naval Reactors (p. 5). For a less driven man, this might have been an unglamorous administrative post, but Rickover used it rebuild the Navy according to his own designs.

Wortman offers readers an absorbing account of Rickover's frustrations, animosities, and battles to drag the Navy into a future that he believed would be defined by technocratic leadership and nuclear power. From his earliest days in the Naval Academy, which he described as a "lousy boy's school," (p. 27) Wortman portrays Rickover as a man at war with the institution through which he built his remarkable career. He bristled under its restrictions and railed against its policies, refusing even to wear a naval uniform. Rickover, Wortman argues, saw the Navy's conservativism as a one-way path to irrelevance, and he eagerly fought against the officers and traditions that he believed kept it anchored to the past. The Navy had no love for Rickover either. Even as he stood poised to oversee the launch the Navy's first nuclear powered submarine, senior leadership looked for ways to block his promotion and push him into unwanted early retirement. As Wortman put it, Rickover "intended to 'save' a Navy that did not want him to save it and despised him for trying." (p. 120)

While much of the book traces his fight to build a nuclear Navy, Wortman makes it clear that Rickover's impact extended far beyond the mechanics of submarine engines. He oversaw an unyieldingly rigorous system for selecting and training the officers who served under him at Naval Reactors, where he ruled as something of a tyrant. Navy brass tried to punish him for bucking conventional criteria for officer promotion, but Rickover's insistence that a modern Navy demanded officers who were not gentlemen but highly trained

technical experts ultimately transformed naval education. Among those officers who succeeded in meeting Rickover's exacting standards, he earned a loyal following. Nuclear trainee Lieutenant James "Jimmy" Carter remained devoted to Rickover throughout his life. After his election as President of the United States in 1976, Carter regularly sought Rickover's council and advice on both domestic and international affairs.

Wortman argues that Rickover's power came, in part, from his knack for positioning himself as something of a celebrity. He gave outspoken testimonies to Congress on nuclear power as well as on Russian advances and American deficits in education and technology. He cultivated powerful friends ready to advance his plans in spite of naval objections and, when needed, Rickover reached over the heads of his superior officers and brought his agenda directly to the American public – like when a member of his team at Naval Reactors stymied efforts to replace Rickover by reaching out to a supportive journalist at *Time,* who eagerly described Rickover's "hard driving […] war on naval indifference" (p. 111) for the magazine's readers.

Rickover appears in this biography as military maverick fighting against the status quo and for 20th century American military and technological dominance. The reader is, however, sometimes left wondering what fueled Rickover's pugnaciousness and relentless drive for power. For Wortman, part of the answer lies in entrenched antisemitism and Rickover's desire to prove within a less-than-welcoming U.S. Navy. Maybe, but Rickover's connections to Jewishness are hard to define. He distanced himself from his parents and siblings, neither of his wives were Jewish, and he seems to have left little evidence about his own feelings about Judaism or Jewish identity. While the Rickover portrayed here is a fascinating character, and Wortman's dynamically written biography offers ample evidence of his impact on American military policy, his motivations remain something of mystery. Even on the topic of nuclear energy, the focus of his career, we are left with unanswered questions. At the end of his career, in 1982, while delivering his final "Rickover lecture" to the members of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee, Wortman recounts that Rickover expressed his devotion to the United States but also his fear that through nuclear power "the human race is ultimately going to wreck itself." (p. 250). It is a striking and disturbing testimony from the man responsible for building the world's deadliest nuclear fleet and provoking the Russians to build their own. Rickover appears here as a man eager

to expound on the failings of others, but not much given to self-reflection. Wortman's engaging biography, however, situates him effectively within 20th century American debates about military might and the nuclear future.

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