

German Navy: A Choice from Two Poisons

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ABSTRACT

The Anglo-German naval arms race prior to the outbreak of World War I was a struggle between two prominent European empires, the British and the German, for naval superiority. The question though is why Germany would instigate such a resource warfare. In this work, the author approaches the issue from strategic, political, and economical perspectives, and concludes that the decision to build a fleet is linked to population growth and *weltpolitik*. This paper also aims to illustrate that the German fleet was not a weird power show, but a peaceful yet dangerous solution to the national situation for Germany.

Keywords: *High Seas Fleet, weltpolitik, World War I, German Empire*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of research on the German Fleet in World War I. Often, though, they attribute the birth of the fleet solely to the will(s) of Admiral Tirpitz and/or Kaiser Wilhelm II, and label these two as radicals. Being a strategically unsound decision though, it is highly unlikely that they would be irrational. This work aims to establish the fact that a German battle fleet is almost a must due to multiple factors, not the will of a couple of men.

2. THE INEFFECTIVE NAVY

During the Great War, while the German Army was holding its own against the joint land force of three empires, the German Navy, in particular the *Hochseeflotte* (English: High Seas Fleet), was militarily unsuccessful. It spent the most time merely as a 'fleet in being', only making a few sorties into the North Sea, and failed to break the British blockade, which would ultimately lead to starvation and a decline of industry[1], a contributing factor in the German defeat in the Great War. The failure of the surface fleet, however, was not surprising since Great Britain possessed a superior battle fleet at the time, with 36 capital ships (battleships and battlecruisers) against 18 from Germany[2], but the question is why the German fleet was built in the first place. While it could seem like the German fleet was a challenge against the Royal Navy, the primary purpose was economic factors, though it could be safely assumed that the Germans would attempt to annihilate the British

fleet given the opportunity. The Germans built a battle fleet in order to maintain overseas trade, the necessity of which stemmed from food shortage, which in turn was caused by population growth. Essentially, it was a must, not a luxury.

3. THE BIRTH OF THE BATTLE FLEET

There were two significant figures who contributed to the development of the German Navy: Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz.

3.1. Kaiser Wilhelm II

Under Wilhelm II, German policies experienced a radical change, namely in military involvement. Bismarck, chancellor of Germany from 1871-1890, was dismissed. The iron chancellor always placed the military under civilian control by submitting the Chief of Staff to the Minister of War[3], but Wilhelm II allowed the military to interfere with politics by establishing the 'royal headquarters'[3], a group of military advisors. It was during his reign when the German Navy was rapidly expanded. In the Kaiser's speech in 1901 to the Northern German Regatta, he expressed his *Weltpolitik* views and the necessity of a navy. He believed that Germany had to 'go out on the waters'[4], and explicitly stated 'protect and advance commerce and trade' so that Germany could 'have a place in the sun'[4]. He justified his obsession with the Navy as commerce protection. Overseas trade was an important source of income for Germany, as seen in the increase of shipping from 279 million tons in 1882 to 542 million tons in 1901[2], and more crucially,

foodstuff was being imported.[5] Wilhelm II never wanted to go to war with England, as stated by Bernhard von Bülow, chancellor of Germany for nine years under Wilhelm II, ‘What William II most desired and imagined for the future was to see himself, at the head of a glorious German fleet, starting out on a peaceful visit to England.’[6] In other words, the fleet was built to keep peace, to make England think twice before resorting to war.

3.2. Admiral Tirpitz

Tirpitz, Secretary of State of the Imperial naval office, concurred with the Kaiser’s reasoning. In his letter exchanges with Admiral Stosch, who believed that competition in the world market would draw British hostility towards Germany due to the latter building a fleet.[7] In response, Tirpitz stated that the consequence would be the same without a fleet: Britain would be acting against the rising economy of Germany[7]. As stated, German shipping nearly doubled during 1892 and 1901,[1] and second only to Britain. Retrospectively, Tirpitz was correct. Great Britain would probably join France and Russia in order to maintain balance to the European power scale, since the German Army would prove themselves to be able to defeat Russia, and almost defeated the Anglo-French forces had the Americans not joined the war. Tirpitz reasoned that without a fleet, Germany would always be at a political disadvantage should tensions grow[7], because trade could be severed at any time. With a strong German fleet, though, Britain would need to think twice. Tirpitz also wrote that a strong battle fleet would persuade other states to ally with Germany,[7] though Britain eventually allied with France and Russia, whose navies were relatively small. While it could bring questions about Tirpitz’ claim, the logic of the statement holds true: that a nation with a great naval force would not risk losing their navy, and to an extent naval dominance, by going to war with another great naval power, especially if the latter possesses a superior army. He finally concluded that only with a fleet could the Germans obtain and maintain their overseas interest, which in his opinion, was essential to the continued existence of the German Empire.[7] He is not wrong since Germany was importing foodstuffs.[5] The main argument here is again about commerce. In fact, Tirpitz did not mention defeating the Royal Navy in his memoirs, nor when he drafted the memorandum to the Reichstag, stating as follows. ‘To protect Germany’s sea trade and colonies in the existing circumstances there is only one means - Germany must have a battle fleet so strong that even for the adversary with the greatest sea power a war

against it would involve such dangers as to imperil his position in the world.’[8] It spoke nothing of defeating the Royal Navy, but a defensive purpose.

3.3. Popular Opinion

The construction of the Navy also lobbied popular support. In 1897, the Flottenverein, or the Navy League, was established. It was made up of middle class individuals, who advocated naval construction,[9] because they looked up to England as a symbol of a free state.[10] Interestingly, the liberals were supporting nationalism in Germany because the Imperial German Navy was the only national institution of the German Empire[10] since the German Army was not the ‘German Army’, but the combined force of the Prussian Army, the Bavarian Army, etc.[10] Liberalism and nationalism do not go together because “Liberalism’s social ontology denies the primacy of nationality as an account of political community and its ethical theory denies the moral primacy of nation or any other kind of community or association above the claims of individuals to equal concern and respect.”[11] Such a phenomenon shows how complicated the political situation in Germany was during the 1900s. Importantly, the middle class, since they benefit from trade, would oppose a war, in line with the Kaiser.

3.4. Opposition

In contrast, the German elites, particularly the Prussian generals, wanted a war, evident in Bernardi’s work in 1912,[12] and General Moltke the Younger also stated in 1912 that war was unavoidable.[2] Anticipating a war, the Army once again became the main focus of military spending,[2] but it was not enough to achieve a swift victory against France. When the war broke out in 1914, the fleet simply was not ready. Even with a larger fund, the fleet would not be ready until 1917.[2] The quote of Frederick the Great, ironically, suits the German Empire well, ‘If you try to hold everything, you hold nothing.’ Indeed, by trying to establish both territorial and naval control, the Germans had the world turned against them, and lost everything.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF NAVAL DOMINANCE

The importance of naval dominance was illustrated in Alfred Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, which was popular among German naval officers.[2] In his work, Mahan stated that it is important

to protect commerce by the means of naval power, citing Spain as an example. The superior British Navy was able to deny Spanish shipping from the West Indies, resulting in the decline of the Spanish Empire.[13] The work of Mahan influenced German naval officers, for example Admiral Scheer, commander of the High Seas Fleet in 1916. He wrote 'By creating a fleet we strengthened our claim to sea power, without which the Empire must wither away.'[14] Scheer was right. Germany was no longer an agricultural state,[10] and imported foodstuffs and materials, [5] the former of which is vital to the survival of a nation.

There are no substitutes for a battle fleet when fighting for naval dominance. Cruisers and submarines could only destroy enemy commerce, but without the pressure of a main fleet on the opponent, would soon be caught and sunk. SMS Emden, a light cruiser detached from the German East Asia Squadron to conduct commerce raiding in the Indian Ocean during the opening stages of the First World War, was caught when a cable station sounded the alarm. Though she sank 39 ships together with SMS Karlsruhe, the impact on British commerce was minimal: 4,000 tons in total,[6] while the British merchant fleet totaled 18,892,089 tons.[15] The German East Asia Squadron, set up to maintain German presence in China, was destroyed after being drawn into a battle with HMS Invincible and HMS Inflexible, two battlecruisers detached from the Grand Fleet.[6] Even when these were detached, the British still maintained superiority in the number of capital ships present in the North Sea. With Churchill's determination to defeat the German squadron, it would be highly likely that more battlecruisers would be sent if there was no battle fleet.[6] Should the Germans devote all of their resources into building cruisers, the British solution would be the same with the U-boat problem: convoy system, though using more powerful ships instead of destroyers. The U-boats were defeated with the convoy system[6] even with the pressure from a home fleet, not to mention if there was not, which would free destroyers used to screen the Grand Fleet, totaling 100,[6] from such duty, and be committed to anti-submarine warfare. Also, more destroyers would be built in place of battleships. Thus, only a battle fleet would be able to wrestle naval dominance and wage sustainable economic warfare.

The argument that a fleet would force the British to lay a less effective blockade would not stand because all the German merchant fleet was paralyzed due to the blockade.[1] Germany mainly obtained goods from neutrals such as Sweden and the Netherlands. In order to effectively wage economic warfare, the British needed to

deal with these factors, regardless of whether a close blockade or a distant one was laid. Unless Germany could defeat Britain in a naval battle and inflict crippling injury to the latter, in times of a war foodstuffs and materials would always be denied from Germany, leading to popular discontent.[1]

5. FACTORS TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION

5.1. Military perspective

Militarily speaking, the fleet is inadvisable unless it could be strong enough to defeat the Royal Navy. Historian Basil Liddell Hart stated that Germany was bound to fail when they were driven back in the First Battle of Marne, which took place in September 1914, the first days of the war. German defeat in this battle diminished their chance of a quick victory over France, a two-front war ensued, which she could not afford because a prolonged war would benefit the Entente Powers more due to the naval blockade by Great Britain, which deprived Germany access to food and material. However, if the resources spent in the High Seas Fleet were given to the Army, it could enable Germany to field more troops since only 0.99% of the population were in regular service.[2] The most modern dreadnoughts were priced over 40,000,000 imperial marks, so there would be enough spending.[2] These statistics show that it was feasible to do so. The additional forces, should they be realized, could have proved decisive in the early days of the war. Germany could inflict considerably more damage onto the French Army in 1914, transfer their forces to the Eastern Front, and force Russia out of the war earlier. Then they would have the time to attack the British before the Americans became involved, possibly forcing a peace negotiation from the British due to heavy casualties suffered by the British Expeditionary Force. The Germans would walk away with newly gained resources from Romania and Ukraine, particularly wheat, and a severely weakened France. With their position in Europe secure, they could then challenge the British at sea. It would be the logical course of action to strengthen the Army even more. Indeed, the prominent Army commanders Waldersee, Schlieffen, and Moltke Jr. had all opposed a battle fleet.[2] Obviously, they are Army commanders, so they do not want the funds to go to the Navy. However, strategically, they would stand a better chance facing only France and Russia, which the Army would prove itself more than able.

5.2. German Security Policies

The Germans had fluctuated their security policies a lot. In 1887, the Germans signed the Reinsurance Treaty with the Russians after the Three Emperors' League ended.[3] Doing so prevented an alliance between France and Russia. With France isolated, Germany had a secured position in Europe, and as such they could pursue their maritime interests. However, after Bismarck resigned after Wilhelm II came to power, the Reinsurance Treaty was not renewed because the Foreign Office saw no advantage in such a treaty, so it was terminated. Now isolated, Russia allied with France soon afterwards.[3] In the 1900s, though, Germany continued to pursue alliance with Russia, going so far as to encourage the Russo-Japanese war,[16] but then they did not strike France when Russia was occupied in the Far East, as Schlieffen proposed.[16] If they did strike, and weaken France enough, it could persuade Russia to ally itself with Germany, since France would not generate enough pressure on the Germans in case of a German assault on Russia. Schlieffen planned to hold France hostage against Britain, should the latter intervene.[16] It was the prime opportunity for the Germans to get rid of their strategic dilemma, but by pursuing peace, the Germans made their position in Europe untenable.

5.3. Population issues

The fleet, and the security policies the Germans enacted, seemed to pursue peace, and keep the commerce running. Although it is true that commerce is important, the question remains why Germany would risk their national security in order to achieve commercial success. One factor could be that the population in Germany rose from 42.5 million in 1875 to 60.3 million in 1905.[5] Such developments made agricultural production unable to feed so many people.[5] There were two sustainable solutions: a war with Russia for their land or a fleet to protect commerce, thus generating more money to buy more food. The Germans chose the fleet, which in itself was not particularly wrong, but their security policies did not go in line with this decision: they did not ally with Russia as they were building the fleet.

5.4. German internal division

Upon closer inspection, it could be seen that most German naval officers were from the middle class,[6] while Army officers were mostly aristocrats. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that the German Empire was a divided state. Eastern Germany

was an agricultural society, and looked to the farmlands in Poland and Ukraine. Since the German Army officers mostly originated there, they demanded resources to the East. The newly annexed former states in western Germany along the Ruhr and the Rhine Rivers, however, were industrial states, and desired overseas trade.[6] As mentioned above, the incredible state of Germany mashed two opposing ideologies together. It seems as if the fleet was a must, or the German Empire would crumble over its own internal issues. The fleet satisfied both liberals and nationalists, at the cost of a poor strategic position in Europe.

6. CONCLUSION

The German Empire faced problems as the prestige of their successes in 1870 began to fade. Their arch-rival France stood ready to oppose them and the British were on their only route to the sea, but with a growing population, they had to construct a battle fleet even though their geographical location, being surrounded by other powerful nations like France and Russia made them unsuitable because they needed to defend themselves on land.[13] Basically, Germany had to build a fleet in order to 'have a place in the sun', as the Kaiser himself said.[4] The German Emperor and his naval officers were justified in their obsession with a battleship fleet. Ironically, the Kaiser's beloved fleet would lead to his own downfall. On October 28, 1918, German sailors started to mutiny,[17] and soon spread to other cities into the German Revolution. The Kaiser abdicated on November 9, 1918, caused by a fleet that he built for his ideal empire.

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