

Alfred von Tirpitz on Submarine Warfare against Great Britain (January 24, 1918)

Abstract

Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz (1849-1930) was the chief architect of the massive build-up of German naval armaments that took place before the First World War. During the war, Tirpitz, who had been appointed state secretary of the naval office [Reichsmarineamt] pushed for unrestricted submarine warfare even though Germany's fleet initially did not have enough vessels to carry out this policy. He was dismissed from the naval office in 1916 because of his persistent and open criticism of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg (and by implication Kaiser Wilhelm's government); Bethmann Hollweg refused to pursue unrestricted submarine warfare because he feared it would draw the United States into the war. In fact, Germany's military leadership and nationalist politicians hoped to replace Bethmann Hollweg with Tirpitz, but Wilhelm II refused to do so. In the fall of 1917 Tirpitz became one of the founders and chairmen (along with Wolfgang Kapp) of the radical nationalist *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei* [German Fatherland Party]. Barely a year after Tirpitz' dismissal, Wilhelm II, pressured by the Supreme Army Command (OHL), ordered the German navy to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning that they would sink all ships, including merchant and passenger ships and those under the flag of neutral countries, without warning as of February 1, 1917.

On this recording from January 1918 Tirpitz reads an edited excerpt from a speech he first gave at the first convention of the newly founded *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei* in Berlin on September 24, 1917. The recording was made by linguist Wilhelm Doegen, who built a collection of voice recordings of leading politicians and other well-known personalities for the Prussian State Library. In his speech, Tirpitz not only justifies Germany's naval armament and submarine warfare as a defense against British imperialist expansion, but he also suggests that by invading neutral Belgium, Germany had simply preempted the same move by the French army. Germany was fighting the war, he claims, not just for its own interests and defense but against "Anglo-American tyranny." The United States had entered the First World War in April 1917 as a result of the unrestricted submarine warfare that Tirpitz had persistently and aggressively advocated.

Note: Tirpitz' quote of the Latin phrase *Germaniam esse delendam* [Germany must be destroyed] refers to an article titled "England and Germany" that appeared in the British weekly *The Saturday Review* in September 1897. The article described what it saw as Bismarck's anti-British foreign policy and concluded with this phrase, a variation of Roman senator Cato the Elder's famous line, *Carthaginem esse delendam* (often abbreviated to *Carthago delenda est*). Tirpitz ends on the absurdly optimistic (for late 1917) claim that "we have the military victory within our grasp... The political victory will also surely be ours, if we have the heart and the resolve to achieve it...Germany, awaken!"

Source

The development of our industry, trade, and exports is closely linked to our decision to pick up where the Hanseatic League left off and set sail for the high seas. Only through close contact with the sea can we gain the global intellectual horizon we need. I am not referring to something in the heavens or in the abstract, but rather something that is necessary for us here on Earth.

Supported by German diligence and German science, our economic development has advanced in leaps

and bounds in recent decades. This was the bone of contention for England. And the more its trust magnates viewed the whole world as a lemon that they alone had the monopoly on squeezing, the stronger this feeling became.

Even before we had a sea power to speak of, even before there was a naval law, it should be noted that a political group formed in England that had as its motto: *Germaniam esse delendam*.

The naval blockade we have declared with our submarines is not a retaliatory measure, although we could well describe it as such in view of England's brutal violation of all maritime law. Our naval blockade is, rather, our legal right. However, out of a certain puritanical mindset, England regards everything that is unfavorable to it as the chosen people as wrong and even sacrilegious, and everything that is favorable to it as right.

Its political leadership has also masterfully managed to drum some of this view into the minds of the people through clever propaganda and, where necessary, through the House. The ruthless, piratical treatment of neutral shipping is nothing. The gagging of Portugal, the brutal subjugation of Greece, which only wanted peace for itself, is perfectly acceptable. But when we prevented the French and English from marching through Belgium, it was called a crime that only barbarians and Huns could commit. Shortly before his death, however, Colonel General von Moltke told me that he had been fully informed about Belgium's position in the event of a possible world war.

Anyone who had closely followed the speeches made by active French ministers in Belgian cities on official occasions before the war and the other events there—I need only mention the fortification issue in Vlissingen—could have known this. The Belgian state has received justice, not injustice, for its behavior. This must be stated clearly and unequivocally!

The tremendous struggle that Germany is now waging is not about Germany alone. In truth, it is about the freedom of the European continent and its peoples. It is against the all-consuming tyranny of Anglo-Americanism. Military victory is within our grasp. Our brave people's army, on land and at sea, will achieve it.

Political victory will also be ours if we have the heart and the determination to achieve it. Germany is fighting for a great ideal. That is why I would like to call out to all regions of our fatherland: Germany, wake up, your hour of destiny has come!

Source: Alfred von Tirpitz, Erklärung zum U-Boot-Krieg gegen Großbritannien, Recording date: January 24, 1918. Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv

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