

England and the German Fleet: Alfred von Tirpitz looks back on the Naval Race (1920)

Abstract

In his memoirs, Alfred von Tirpitz (1849–1930) looks back on the arms race that led up to World War I. He faults both German diplomacy and British animosity for the escalation of tensions between the two industrial powers. For Tirpitz, the Moroccan crisis of 1911 was the single most unfortunate event in Anglo-German relations.

Source

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In the first few years of its encirclement policy, England did not take Germany's fleet construction program seriously. It was convinced that Germany would not be able to build a first-class fleet with its limited budget. The English believed that our technology was under-developed and that we lacked sufficient organizational experience. They were accustomed to seeing us fail, since a large number of Prussian and German naval plans had never made it past the planning stages. It was only in 1904 that they looked at our naval program anew. Contrary to my wishes, we presented all our ships to Edward VII at the Kiel Regatta Week, and the Kaiser toasted "the renewed maritime power of the newly created German Empire." King Edward responded coolly and, when inspecting our ships, exchanged meaningful glances and words with Selborne, the first lord of the Admiralty. These exchanges were disagreeable to me. It was an unpleasant shock to the English that we had accomplished so much with limited funds and that we had developed an organic process that was more methodical than their own. In this area, too, they felt threatened by the Germans' manner of work, patiently laying stone upon stone ["Stein-auf-Stein-Tragen"].

Lord Fisher subsequently ordered a concentration of British naval power against us, and in February 1905, this action was underscored in a speech by Arthur Lee, the civil lord of the Admiralty. For no good reason, Lee stated that the British Navy, if necessary, would carry out an initial strike before anyone on the other side of the North Sea would have time to read in the papers that war had been declared. England's behavior in 1904-05 demonstrated that, at the time, she was strongly disposed toward delivering a single military blow that would destroy the entire foundation of Germany's international standing. Her disposition toward war is perfectly understandable if one considers that war posed no risk for England at the time. In 1905, the admiralty hoped to counter our nascent naval undertaking by building the dreadnought class, operating under the assumption that the German navy would not be able to bring similarly large ships through the North Sea Canal.

This chain of political and maritime threats, accompanied by a campaign to rally public opinion against us, justifiably alienated a broad cross-section of German society. On the one hand, England's maritime measures were an acknowledgement that she was taking our fleet construction program seriously. On the other, her nearly decade-long desire for our political submission was well known, and our fleet was too small to justify a program involving the concentration of British squadrons in the North Sea. This move was clearly intended to intimidate us and, if possible, to put an end to our drive for independence in world politics.

As a consequence, I was pressured by various sides in 1905-06 to effect a substantial increase in the

strength of the German fleet with the goal of both arming ourselves against the threat of war with Britain and teaching the British a political lesson. The Kaiser, who was heavily influenced by a Navy League campaign to this end, also wanted me to demand of the Reichstag that the service life of our large ships be shortened. As the result of a parliamentary misunderstanding, service life had been fixed at 25 years in the Naval Law, which was longer than in foreign navies and resulted in an aging fleet.

Nonetheless, various reasons compelled me to oppose the introduction of an amendment at that time, and in early 1906 I offered my resignation in connection with this. The amendment that I introduced in 1906, which easily passed in the Reichstag, only included the six large cruisers that the Reichstag had not approved in 1900 and for which I immediately announced renewed requests in 1906. I also had to ask the Reichstag for the larger sums required to begin dreadnought construction, which the English had forced upon us, as well as all the world's navies. Further, the Reichstag finally had to approve the funds required to enlarge the North Sea Canal on account of increased vessel sizes.

I responded with reserve to the pressures I was under to make additional demands, which not only had a calming effect on foreign policy but also increased the trust shown by the Reichstag. Under the circumstances, any additional demands in 1904-05 would probably have resulted in the direct threat of war without bringing us any immediate benefits. Over and above this, the navy would not have been able to handle further additions.

Fiscal year 1908 was the point at which, for many reasons, we had to ask for the vessels' service life to be reduced. In the summer of 1907, even before the Imperial Naval Office had decided in favor of a naval amendment, a veritable battle broke out between the centrist parties and the Liberals over who would be the bigger champion of such an amendment, so we had no difficulty having our demands met. It was the first time the Liberals had voted both for the ships and the principle of a legal commitment.

This amendment did not increase the number of ships under the Naval Law, but it did considerably rejuvenate the fleet, thus increasing its combat strength. The replacement of the ships also meant an acceleration of dreadnought construction, a class of ships that had shaken the confidence in older vessels.

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The only real crisis in Anglo-German relations between 1904 and 1914 occurred in the summer of 1911 and resulted from the manner in which our political leadership attempted to resolve the Morocco dispute with France. Like so many German diplomats, the foreign secretary, v. Kiderlen-Wächter, lacked any talent for dealing with England. He did not do damage by capitulating but rather by his sloppy handling of the affair. At his suggestion, the chancellor dispatched the gunboat *Panther* to the Moroccan port of Agadir on July 1, 1911. Though the British government demanded an explanation, the chancellor left them in the dark about our intentions for several weeks. The result was the speech that Lloyd George read before the English cabinet on July 21 warning Germany that Britain would side with France if that country was challenged.

I was off duty and about to leave on my summer holiday when I learned of the order to dispatch the *Panther*. I considered it a sign of disorganization on the part of our imperial leaders that the Secretary of the Navy had not been consulted prior to a naval manoeuvre of such import for international politics, and, from the moment I learned that we had not informed England, I was also convinced that this show of power on the Atlantic was a blunder. If Kiderlen believed it would be necessary to make a military gesture, it would have to be made on land and solely against the French. I would have been opposed to this in principle. A flag is easily hoisted on a pole, but it is often difficult to retrieve it honorably. We did not want to go to war. But the imperial leadership made the gravest miscalculation when it did not reveal our intentions in the first weeks of July. Kiderlen made subsequent assurances that the chancellor had

never considered demanding Moroccan territory. After Lloyd George's threatening speech, though, it looked as if he was backing away from England's raised sword. Our reputation suffered a blow across the world, and public opinion in Germany was influenced by this failure. "England stopped Germany" ran the headline in the international press.

It was the first serious diplomatic defeat since Bismarck had taken over political leadership, a defeat that hit us all the harder because the fragile edifice of our international standing was not yet based on power but primarily on prestige. This had proved effective during Delcassé's removal (1905), but now we were shown how much it had been eroded. If we had simply accepted this slap in the face, it would have exacerbated France's proclivity for war, its "new spirit," and we would have exposed ourselves at the next turn to an even worse humiliation. So it was a mistake to try to hide the rebuff we had suffered, which was what the imperial leadership wanted to do, rather than openly acknowledging it and drawing conclusions from the mistake. If a state knows that its citizens' well-being rests not on whitewashing the facts, but on power and prestige, there is but one means to restore its reputation in such situations if it wants to avert war. It must show that it is not afraid—and simultaneously safeguard itself more effectively against defeat in the face of increased likelihood of war. We needed to do what Bismarck had done in similar cases, namely, to introduce a military bill, and we needed to act calmly and without resorting to provocation.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I traveled to Berlin in autumn. I told the chancellor that we had suffered a diplomatic defeat and that we had to remedy it with a naval amendment. The chancellor denied the "defeat"—a term that greatly offended him, as he later told the chief of the Naval Cabinet—and he feared that an amendment would lead to war with England.

The amendment that I had in mind was not predicated on an actual increase in the size of our fleet, but on the improvement of its readiness for deployment. One of the weaknesses of our naval strength rested in the short service period and the change of recruits each fall, which crippled the fleet's ability to strike during a particular period of the year. We were ultimately able to improve our military readiness without a major increase in vessel numbers by activating a reserve squadron, which meant that three squadrons would be constantly in service instead of only two.

Since this enabled us to keep nearly all members of a crew on the same ship during their service, we were also able to simplify our severely strained basic sea training and to free up the officer corps for deep sea navigation and other previously neglected higher duties. It proved necessary to go easier on the personnel, who were quickly worn down by monotonous duty, so that the men moving up the ranks would retain the necessary strength. These organizational reforms necessitated the construction of just three additional ships in the span of twenty years, and they allowed us to improve the quality of the navy for a very small amount of money.

No expert on British politics would have thought that the addition of three vessels in the span of twenty years would provoke England to go to war if had not already decided to do so of its own accord. Naturally, our ambassador, Count Metternich, did not anticipate the danger of war as a result of these actions either. Nonetheless, due to the desire of the imperial leaders to accommodate England, the request in the amendment for three ships was reduced to two after long negotiations with the constantly vacillating chancellor – negotiations that were influenced by a visit to Berlin by Haldane, the English minister of war.

This was the first, the last, and an entirely insubstantial enlargement of our fleet compared with the naval plan of 1900. As I have already noted, in 1906 we merely renewed the 1900 bill, and in 1908 we did not increase the number of ships at all.

Many believe that in our time the German Empire could have pursued an open, honest relationship with England, and that these prospects were ruined solely by the failures of German statesmanship and, in particular, the construction of a fleet. If this view becomes anchored in the German consciousness, it will positively confirm the truism that history is written by victors. In this case, the vanquished would be falsifying history in order to pay tribute to Anglo-Saxon world domination.

The British now deny wanting to go to war against us. Hence all those in Germany who believe that the fleet construction program was responsible for the war cannot even identify an opponent. The self-incrimination follows the wrong lead: the historical truth can sooner be found in one of Bismarck's last statements, made in 1898, when we did not even have a navy. He regretted that "the relations between Germany and England are not better than they are." Unfortunately, he did not have a solution for this, since the only means known to him—bridling German industry—was not readily practicable.

We would not have been able to gain England as a friend and patron without returning to the rank of a poor agricultural country. Yet there was one means to significantly improve relations with the English: the creation of a German fleet that made any attack on German trade a riskier proposition than at the time of Bismarck's statement. In this sense, the German navy continued to perform its duty up to July 1914, despite the various failures of German politics, and it is not the fault of the navy that it was not able to serve its purpose as a peacekeeper more effectively or for a longer period of time. It is incomprehensible to me that Herr v. Bethmann Hollweg continues to pin the blame on the so-called naval policy, for which he himself was responsible for eight years as chancellor. It is all the more incomprehensible since, like Lichnowsky and other experts at the Foreign Office, he himself perceived a tangible détente in Anglo-German relations and acknowledged that our fleet construction program, as it drew closer to completion, did not stand in the way of improving our relations with England. The outbreak of war was not caused by a deterioration in Anglo-German relations: an especially tragic twist is that Germany and England were closer in 1914 than in 1896, when Germany had no navy—and even in 1904 when it had a weak navy and Prince Bülow succeeded in bridging this dangerous period. The German navy protected the peace in keeping with its specific function. Interested parties are attempting to alter this clear fact even today. Added to this is the self-destructive streak in the character of Germans, who always love to believe the worst, and who will ridicule as foolish the very thing that they found most sensible the previous day.

Before the war, Bethmann Hollweg seemed to agree with me that the Naval Law, the basis of all our prospects in international politics, had to be preserved without any tampering. For my part, I concurred with the chancellor that we had to do our best to improve relations with England. From his first days in office, I supported the chancellor in his efforts to accommodate the English in the matters suggested by him. In particular, I influenced the Kaiser in this area and did everything I could to keep the negotiations on a naval agreement initiated in 1908 on track.

Based on these negotiations, which were initially conducted by private negotiators and severely delayed on several occasions by the English, I slowly but surely realized that the English did not take a naval agreement seriously. Rather, they were bent on convincing the Foreign Office that the German fleet was to blame for all their woes and that, without it, Germans would have paradise on earth. The English worked toward this goal with undeniable cleverness, as anyone will confirm who is familiar with the thinking of our Foreign Office at the time or who witnessed the chancellor's misjudgment of the British political psyche. V. Kühlmann, a German diplomat in London, was one of the main proponents of the view that the horrible German fleet was all that stood in the way of a German *Weltpolitik* pursued arm-in-arm with England.

The English government's lack of commitment to a mutual naval agreement first became evident when our approval of their individual demands brought no tangible results. Most significantly, it was not until 1913 that they approved the very core of the agreement—a bilateral reduction in the navy based on a

predetermined ratio—even though Lloyd George had hinted at such a prospect earlier, in 1908. It was felt, accepted, and even expressed by all participants that there was no need to fear a war with England on account of the fleet construction program. With each passing year, the risk of a war with England diminished at the same rate that respect for the German navy grew and war became unprofitable even for the jingoistic segment of the English population. The voices of hard-liners such as the *Saturday Review* or the Civil Lord Lee grew fainter. In London there was an increased tendency toward a more businesslike treatment of German relations. The Anglo-German treaty that was ready to be signed in 1914 appears to be one of various bits of evidence of this. At the very least, it was understood by its German drafters as a serious affair.

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Source: Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 93–100.

Translation: Adam Blauhut

Recommended Citation: England and the German Fleet: Alfred von Tirpitz looks back on the Naval Race (1920), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-794>> [September 26, 2025].