

The Fleet and Anglo-German Relations: Rear Admiral Tirpitz to Admiral von Stosch (February 13, 1896)

Abstract

Alfred von Tirpitz (1849–1930) was Admiral of the German navy and chief architect of the massive increase in naval armaments in the years before the First World War. He argued that sea power was the key to becoming a great power. A large navy to match Germany's new found industrial strength would challenge British dominance. This naval build-up provoked British animosity.

Source

I have received Your Excellency's kind letter dated the 12th of this month and will hasten to reply. Having just returned to Kiel, I only now have the chance to express to Your Excellency my cordial thanks for the highly instructive and interesting letter of December 25, 1895. My time in Berlin was completely consumed by very urgent and unexpected affairs. I would like to inform Your Excellency in complete confidence and for Your Excellency's ears alone that I had the opportunity to present Your Excellency's opinions at the highest level, including Your Excellency's view on the necessary naval developments. I am hopeful that the matter will be pursued where it was abandoned in 1883. Perhaps I will be able to provide Your Excellency with more details at a later date. As Your Excellency already knows, my appointment as squadron commander to Asia is now uncertain. I am saddened by this, since it was my great desire to go. It would have done my nerves a great deal of good to be relieved of this taxing intellectual activity for a while and to distance myself from Madrid. I must wait and see what fate has in store. As for the Transvaal matter, in contrast to the general public and our political leadership, I believe that we have blundered. England is doing nothing about America's affront not only because of what it fears might follow but also because America is an unpleasant opponent; and Germany is paying the price since it currently lacks any substantial naval power. At the moment, our policies only build on the army as a genuine foundation, but the army only has a direct impact on our national borders. Beyond these borders it only has an indirect impact through the pressure exerted from here. Our politicians do not understand that in many cases the value of an alliance with Germany, even for the states of Europe, does not rest on our army but on our navy. For instance, if Russia and France oppose England on a matter, the support of our fleet is of little significance. But if England has a Pittite understanding of policy, she will prefer Germany as an enemy over a strictly neutral Germany. As an enemy, we will always be a highly prized object; in the event of our neutrality, we will profit extraordinarily as England's rival. The English are well aware of this. Up to now, our policies have completely overlooked the political significance of naval power. Yet if we want to go out into the world and increase our economic strength at sea, we will only construct a hollow edifice if we do not obtain a degree of naval strength. If we go out into the world, we will find either existing interests or interests that will be claimed in the future. These make conflicts of interest inevitable. Now that the prestige of 1870 has faded, how can even the cleverest policies accomplish anything without real power that reflects the diversity of interests? Naval power is the only politically versatile type of power there is. This is why we will always end up getting shortchanged politically, even if there is no war. We must bear in mind that England probably no longer believes we will send our army into battle against Russia for her benefit. On the other hand, if Germany is the one paying the price, England can make Russia considerable concessions—in East Asia, for instance. This is the danger that we will face if we get entangled in a conflict involving Russia, France and England. Even if we were to say that we would not wage war over transatlantic interests, the other three states would not come to the same agreement, and we would continue to operate at a political disadvantage. Much more

can be said on these matters; I at least wanted to allude to the fact that I did not form my opinion on the current Transvaal question without long rumination. I naturally had the same view after I had read the telegram to President Kruger in the newspaper. To make matters worse, the telegram was not well edited: since England has the right to approve any treaties this state enters into with foreign countries—which we do not contest—we were not able to offer the Transvaal *our* help.

Still, this incident can do some good. I would even consider a larger disgrace of this sort to be useful to us if it opened the eyes of our misguided parliamentarians. First, the Anglomania in certain circles would definitively stop, and, second, the nation would be roused to build a fleet as outlined in Directive IX [*Dienstschrift IX*]. In fact, this bill is expected to be introduced in the next budget. The national government and the heads of parliament naturally see no prospect for success. If the navy wholeheartedly demonstrates the military and political value of our current fleet, it will at least be doing its part, and history will be forced to hold other people accountable. So I believe that we should retract our claws and, over the next twelve years, build a modern fleet whose strength will approximate the size discussed in Your Excellency's 1872 paper.

[As for operations against England, if war breaks out in the near future, let me inform Your Excellency that the Supreme Command has not yet worked through this scenario; the more pressing issue has been the possibility of war against France and Russia. We worked solidly with two competent departmental heads to create a reasonable plan for this contingency. We had nothing at all when I came to Berlin, and we were all astonished at how much ground we were able to cover. We will be able to transfer much, but certainly not all, of this model to other cases; the military approach will require further consideration. For this reason I am only able to discuss my general understanding of this matter, not one that has been entirely thought through. I do not have great hopes for cruiser warfare, even against England. The ships that we have overseas will be quickly cut off, probably captured and destroyed, since England will not respect any political neutrality. We will be able to cause some disquiet with our Lloyd steamships, but not much, since our steamship fleet has not been built with this purpose in mind—though it could have benefited both sides, both Lloyd and the navy. While we lack any ports abroad, the English have ports and coal everywhere, and the world is teeming with English warships of the most modern design. This leaves us with our actual battle fleet, which must be concentrated in the North Sea. As long as it continues to exist, it must cover the Baltic and paralyze English trade there. If England badly underestimates our naval power—if she underestimates our only strength, the torpedo boats—there will be a battle off Heligoland with those English forces that are lying ready in England. It is conceivable that we might repel a poorly executed offensive by the English fleet and profit from the catastrophe breaking out in London—also, Russia might consider it an advantageous opportunity to strike England herself. But we would not be able to withstand a second English offensive.

If England acts correctly, she will attack us with overwhelming superiority, taking Borkum and establishing a foothold there. She will block the North and Baltic Seas, which will simultaneously serve as a show of force against Russia. She will take our colonies, destroy our trade across the world and wreak as much havoc along our coasts as possible. If France does not come to our aid, we will be forced to capitulate. Can we count on this happening? I don't think so. If England pursues the right military policy, she will have to mobilize her entire home fleet, if only to guard against complications. She will have to mass her forces in the mouth of the Thames with strong surveillance squadrons to counter our attack. English mobilization will proceed slightly more slowly than ours, at least if it is done on a large scale. We would possibly have a few days' head start and would have to decide whether we should go into the Thames with everything we could muster. We could use to full advantage the many vessels we have for harbor and river warfare. At one go, we could capture a fairly large part of the English mercantile fleet and be in a position to shell parts of London. The question is whether this short time period would be sufficient [?] to achieve success in the form of an agreement that is fair for both sides.

As Your Excellency sees, this would be an *act of desperation*, yet it is perhaps our only chance. Even in the event of a strategic defense, our only chance lies in biding our time and hoping for allies. We only have a real chance if the French navy joins us along with the Russians. Although I do not doubt for a moment that England will nonetheless emerge victorious, this turn of events would be a very unpleasant complication arising from a small-scale war with Germany.

Your Excellency will easily see from the offensive outlined above that, for a thorough evaluation, we need accurate information on forces and speed of mobilization. In addition, German naval officers need to make a careful study of the Thames to make a more or less reliable [illegible] assessment. Nevertheless, Your Excellency will see how I currently assess power relations and recognize the direction we need to take. When it comes to British military power, our newspapers are as reliable as a deaf man discussing music. Your Excellency is definitely right in saying that English policy is guided by trade interests. The “City” forges English policy, yet this does not change the fact that we must reckon with this circumstance. We currently have many ships that are obsolete or not seaworthy. As soon as we have two to three modern squadrons supported by cruisers, as well as reserve material in this old fleet, the city on the Thames will suddenly see Germany as a nation worthy of respect under all circumstances and in all matters.

It will probably be impossible to bring back the vessels from East Asia. They do not increase our chances against England, and any attempt to retrieve them would make it even more obvious that we have gotten ourselves into an unfavorable situation there. All told, there is a tendency in Berlin to demand a greater presence abroad. I have also spoken in favor of this. But we do not have any vessels for this purpose, and naturally we cannot do without the cruiser squadron in case of a war against France at home.

I beg Your Excellency to excuse the rather long ramblings above, but the matter has greatly preoccupied me].

Source: Rear Admiral Tirpitz to Admiral von Stosch on the political function and significance of naval power in Germany's relations with England (February 13, 1896) Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, Nachlaß Tirpitz N 253/321; reprinted in Volker Berghahn and Wilhelm Diest, *Rüstung im Zeichen der wilhelminischen Weltpolitik: Grundlegende Dokumente 1890-1914* [*Armament within the Context of Wilhelmine Global Politics: Key Documents 1890-1914*]. Dusseldorf, 1988, pp. 114-17.

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