

The German Naval Office and Public Opinion (September 24, 1900)

Abstract

To support the construction of a German battle fleet, the German Naval Office established a News Office. It rallied popular sentiment, employing a range of “modern” techniques, such as planting articles in newspapers, paying German professors to speak on behalf of naval construction, and supporting a popular organization, the German Navy League, which grew to several hundred thousand members.

Source

General background

The News Office was set up in the summer of 1897, when the government had become convinced that the creation of a strong fleet was necessary for Germany, and that, to this end, it was imperative to enlighten and educate the German people about its maritime responsibilities and needs.

The tasks that will fall to the News Office in the future will arise from the general domestic and international political situation, and from the goals that will be set regarding the further expansion of the fleet. In view of the fact that, according to the law of 1900, the number of new ships permitted to be built per year is subject to the decision of the Reichstag, heightened activity on the part of the News Office will occasionally be required in the upcoming budget deliberations.

As far as foreign politics is concerned, it is naturally impossible to predict whether there will be particular incidents (military conflicts, for example) that will have to be exploited for educational purposes. Even in the absence of particular international provocations, attention will have to be paid to the growth of other navies, the spread of imperialistic ideas, and the friendly competition surrounding the world market and global trading routes; moreover, the interest of the German people in such developments will have to be further awakened and actively maintained.

A look back

When it comes to the appropriate exploitation of the future domestic political situation, it is important to take a look back at what has been achieved thus far and the methods that have been employed.

The activity of the News Office has extended in various directions:

- a) immediate work in the daily press;
- b) supporting existing associations like the Colonial Society and the Pan-German League, the Navy League, the Foreign Association, and related efforts by individual persons or organizations in educational work [*Aufklärungsarbeit*] in the maritime field;
- c) proposing and supporting all efforts by which the importance and responsibilities of the navy can be brought home to the German people by way of speech, the written word, and pictures.
- d) suggesting to important men from the scientific and political world that they become involved in educational work on their own, procuring and compiling material and providing it to such individuals;

e) publishing scholarly works about the naval interests of a state and how to protect them –namely from historical and economic as much as military-maritime perspectives – partly in essays in leading papers, weeklies, and monthlies, and partly in books (Nauticus-Schriften). The material was created in part by the News Office itself, in part with the assistance of permanent collaborators, whose numbers have grown over the years. From the summer of 1897 to the spring of 1898, and from the fall of 1899 to the spring of 1900, the activity was a heightened – and at times polemical and agitational – one; by contrast, from the spring of 1898 to the fall of 1899, and in the spring of 1900, it was calmer and educational. The calmer period saw, among other things, the creation of the *Yearbooks for German Maritime Interests* (Nauticus).

Considering that the entire matter is a novelty, success came fairly quickly. This can be seen today if one follows maritime issues in the daily press and magazines. It becomes apparent that, compared with earlier times, a lot more is being produced both quantitatively and qualitatively. Today, the vast majority of the above-mentioned population circles approve of the government's naval program, and some go even further. Many collaborators, both invited and unbidden, helped in spreading these ideas, so that later (1898/1900) it was only necessary to set the basic tone from time to time, to support literary publications, or to prevent or subdue undesirable, politically imprudent, or rash statements. It was striking how quickly it proved possible to persuade the relevant circles of the correctness of the direction to be taken in expanding the fleet (construction of line-of-battle ships). Scattered attempts – also by experts – to challenge this failed. Today, I believe that the idea of building line-of-battle ships as the foundation for the expansion of the fleet is supported virtually without reservation – also within naval officers' circles. In lay circles, at any rate, this direction is seen as natural and given.

On the occasion of the campaign in the winter of 1899/1900, vigorous efforts were also begun to interest broader segments of the population in the naval question. The undeniable success in this is that portions of the masses have also at least considered this question.

Various signs indicate that not only has an interest as such been awakened, but a favorable interest, and in some places also a certain understanding of the importance of these questions. If one studies the Social Democratic essays that were written in complete opposition back then, one often gets the impression that the authors sought to support their divergent opinion with merely artificial means.

It is difficult to come up with an entirely accurate picture of the extent to which the idea of the navy has penetrated the masses. On the whole, the masses have not yet been seized by it. We know from experience that it takes considerable time before the minor press takes a sufficient interest in this kind of new, unfamiliar material and before it exerts its influence on the population.

One may perhaps conclude that, to all appearance, opposition to the naval fleet has unfortunately strengthened through agitation in agrarian circles, whereas it has declined in commercial and industrial circles. The latter also applies to some circles of workers, with the exception, naturally, of the very determined Social Democrats.

Great success – as can be inferred from all kinds of small indications – has attended the agitation of the younger generation, which has so far been undertaken on a small scale.

In summary, it can be said that the entire naval movement, as was always predicted, has developed and displayed a very specific power to unite the people, which would not have been insignificant in possible new elections. Unfortunately, this aspect did not exert its full effect, because, simultaneous with the naval law, a series of other laws (the meat inspection law, *lex Heinze*) preoccupied public opinion – intentionally or unintentionally – and were, by their nature, suited to divisive effects.

[...]

Prospects

The following may be predicted for the immediate future in domestic politics:

The parliamentary struggles and the popular movement that will follow or precede them will have as their focal point in the immediate future the signing of new trade treaties.

In the process, parliamentary and political life will escalate, in part, into a battle between agrarianism and imperialism. The interest in the fleet itself will then recede for a time. However, it will hardly be possible to prevent the strong emphasis on economic interests, which constituted the best argument of the fleet supporters during the time of the fleet campaign, from being further exploited during debates over trade treaties. This will throw naval interests and agrarian efforts into opposition once again, and the idea of the fleet will not gain ground in the agrarian camp.

To the extent that I have been able to form an opinion, I believe that, as things now stand, the opposition between industry and the agrarian sector will become increasingly bitter, and that in the end – even though the majority of the Reichstag will be inclined at the moment to make concessions to the agrarians – the industrial direction will win, in keeping with the pressure of conditions. However, that moment is probably still a few decades away.

As I see it, the obvious objection that none of this concerns the admiralty is not valid, considering the future. [In the future, these economic struggles will also pose difficulties to the admiralty.]

After everything that has been said, the naval administration must continue to pay great attention to economic and political conditions.

A further highlighting of the economic interests behind the need to construct the fleet, which rest unquestionably on the flourishing of industry and which grow with it, creates enemies for the navy, however, in the camp that has always been – and will remain so to a high degree – crucial to pushing through the government's demands. The forgoing of these arguments would be exploited accordingly by the agrarian camp, and it would also render pointless the effort to continue winning over broad, left-leaning segments of the population, who are interested in industry, who, in part, already have more moderate views, and who see in all agrarian endeavors something hostile to them.

The Means of Agitation to Date and their Application in the Immediate Future. Confidential Agents. Collaborators.

As already mentioned, the agitation to date began by arousing the interest of scientifically educated men. Gradually, the circle of these kinds of collaborators has expanded considerably. Success was always most emphatic when these gentlemen were won over by way of personal acquaintance. It would be advisable to continue furthering these personal relationships and to attempt in this way to attract additional forces, especially those who have an influence on very specific strata (Catholic professors, executive boards of associations). From time to time, these collaborators will also have to be given Imperial Recognition through the mediation of the Reich Naval Office [*Reichs-Marine-Amt*].

Circulation of pamphlets

One aid in maintaining relationships has been, and must continue to be, the distribution of relevant literary materials to all leading individuals who have shown an interest. This will ensure, for one thing, that they will continually be kept informed, will be stimulated to collaborate, and, without always being aware of it, will be influenced in the right direction. To achieve the latter goal completely, it will be necessary – as it has been to date – to send them specially printed materials created by the News Office or at its instigation.

In times when the political life is taxing the general interest heavily with other issues, it is probably advisable to send out these kinds of pamphlets less frequently. The purpose is then merely to prevent the interest in the naval question from becoming dormant. At another, less agitated time, professionally written, longer articles and pamphlets should be considered. In both cases, economic questions will also have to be treated not infrequently, which is why it is impossible to do without constant support from a scientific collaborator.

Through all the press matters influenced by the News Office there must continue to run, like a red thread, the notion that will set the future direction for the further expansion of the navy, and which is later to form the foundation for a renewed agitation. – This direction will have to be given to the News Office by His Excellency. (Expansion of the foreign fleet.)

The empirical statement – drawn from advertising – that the goal is achieved only by repeatedly placing something before people's eyes also applies in this case.

Daily press

The support for the daily press, which the News Office itself influenced more strongly in 1897/98 than during the last campaign, must also continue. Wolff's telegraph office is the best means for distributing a shorter news item whose official character is supposed to stand out. For less official and somewhat longer items, the *Korrespondenzen* should be considered the most expedient means.

Experience has taught us that the larger Berlin papers have made themselves quite independent over time by acquiring suitable staff members and using the material supplied by them. At times, they were even recalcitrant when it came to accepting articles the News Office wanted. (Of course, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* is an exception, and it will be used as before for highly official news).

Without withholding from these papers the support they may ask for, and in addition to the occasional use of the same for more important publications, it is surely also advisable to seek to make the small press – possibly also the leftist press or marginal publications – more interested in exerting an influence on receptive newspaper readers who eagerly read their provincial papers. So far, we hardly have any experience in this direction. At most, it should be noted that all requests of this sort sent to the News Office by provincial papers were promised fulfilment; for the most part any involvement occurred only once and when it was necessary to respond to a direct request.

Perhaps one of the next tasks could be organizing this kind of influence on the press. Preacher Hülle might be considered as an advisor to this organization. The danger here is that, as with all correspondences (naval correspondences), a shortage of material could easily occur, which cannot be averted with the powers of the News Office. The permanent employment of a skilled journalist could remedy this situation.

It is also possible that a greater involvement of naval officers with a talent for writing could be effective. In this case, one might have to consider easing relevant service regulations. The larger papers that are not published in Berlin will still have to be kept up to date from time to time with the help of correspondents known to the News Office and with journalist-assistants. In technical terms, it is important for all such articles be brief (1 1/2 columns) and written in a captivating style. More attention than before should be paid to illustrated journals. Many papers are not yet aware of how willing the News Office is to provide them with illustrations or text upon request. Their influence is very substantial, and an effort must be made to make contact with them, and to get them permanently involved through the monetary or other benefits that will accrue to them from these relationships. In this direction, as well, the News Office faces an expansion of its tasks. The desired purpose can be accomplished with the help of topical photographs that are otherwise difficult to procure for these publications, and by making them

available free of charge.

To further increase interest in the navy and to spread information, exhibits, slide shows, joint excursions, and lectures must be supported with the utmost willingness.

There is no doubt that slide lectures were very successful last winter.

Here, too, one cannot always wait for requests for photographs, but should, in a careful manner, suggest the distribution of such pictures and the holding of suitable lectures.

Information must be provided on questions regarding points of view, material, and literature – even when extensive demands are made in this regard. On general matters – for example, the hiring of ship boys – periodicals that explain employment procedures in a briefer and clear manner than the official regulations will be of great use.

The extent to which the News Office should become more or less active than before in this direction (the personnel issue) will have to depend on whether a shortage of ship boys or cadets becomes apparent. With the help of some funds, it should not be difficult to expand successfully in this direction.

An attempt must be made to instil in the next generation an interest in the navy by giving suitable support to youth publications, providing these to educational institutions, and creating cheap, illustrated printed matter concerning naval themes, wall maps (e.g. world maps for municipal schools), postcards, and other paper articles that are suitable for public libraries and schools. Important in this regard is that, along with the growing interest, greater knowledge is spread about technical naval matters as well as the economic foundations. The goal is for the future generation to be just as educated about these questions as the English and American populations.

If a well-known and widely-read author writing for young people could be prompted to create naval works for youngsters, then great benefits could be expected. Moreover, a sensational novel or play intended for adults would also be exceedingly useful for stimulating interest in the navy. It is regrettable that modern German history offers little suitable material on such topics.

Associations

The patriotic associations that are working on behalf of the naval matter (Colonial Society, Pan-German League, Naval League) have so far been supported in every regard. In principle, this should also be continued in the future.

This support will be relatively easy for the Pan-German League and the Colonial Society, more difficult perhaps for the Naval League. In the case of the latter, there is a danger that it will attempt – on the basis of the successes achieved so far, most of which are attributable to the News Office – to go its own way, and will not consult the News Office in its undertakings. Should that happen, then the League could conceivably end up harming naval matters. That danger is all the more real as the League, for a variety of reasons, will hardly become very popular among broader circles of the population, because it got off on the wrong foot from the beginning.

The News Office must attempt to maintain contact with the Naval League for as long as possible, and to prevent its leadership from making errors in judgement.

In this regard, the best results can be expected from the personal influence of the executive of the News Office on the leadership of the League.

Source: Frigate Captain August von Heeringen: Memorandum regarding the tasks and working methods of the News Office (September 24, 1900). Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, RM 3/955; reprinted in Volker Berghahn and Wilhelm Diest, *Rüstung im Zeichen der wilhelminischen Weltpolitik: Grundlegende Dokumente 1890-1914*. Dusseldorf, 1988, pp. 201–11.

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