



1 *Weltpolitik*, expansion and threat

Speaking to Congress, the American Chief of Naval Operations in 2020 argued that the purpose of the US Navy hinged on the timeless missions of sea control and power projection.¹ Arms races and military build-ups are still a recurring phenomenon in global politics today. Australian and international media headlines relating to China's naval build-up and its territorial expansion into international waters in the South China Sea reflect similar regional friction that also existed in East Asia and the Pacific between two competing naval powers prior to 1914. In both cases, then and now, Australia's geographical proximity and defence options were causes of concern.

To what extent did German policy and activity in the Asia-Pacific region before 1914 contribute to international tension? It is clear from the extensive archival holdings of diplomatic and military/naval documents and the writings of leading policy makers that Germany regarded Asia as the decisive arena of the future and a place where a strong foothold had to be established as early as possible in order to counterbalance the expansion of its great-power rivals in the Western hemisphere. Here Britain and the United States came first into contention (as exemplified by Germany's acquisition of New Guinea, Samoa and other areas and attempts to acquire the Philippines²) soon followed by the rise of Japan after its victory over Russia in 1905³.

The background discussion of the causes of the world conflagration in 1914 has been dominated by considerations of European issues. A consequence of this has been that German activity in the Asia-Pacific region has not fully been taken into account, although this featured prominently in contemporary and later assessments such as that of A. W. Jose in the Australian official war history.⁴ The extent, or even the reality, of a German threat in the region in 1914 has been questioned. World War I has been seen by some contemporary historians as something that was primarily a European concern with the justification for participation by the British Pacific Dominions and the USA open to question. The evidence provided in the German documents themselves demands an extensive revision of this approach.⁵

¹ Admiral Michael Gilday, USN, *Statement to the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Management*, 2 December 2020.

² See the early perceptive analysis by Lester Burrell Shippee, 'Germany and the Spanish-American War', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (July, 1925), 754- 777.

³ It is interesting that Germany continued attempts to woo Japan out of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance from its formation, extending well into the War years.

⁴ A.W. Jose, *The Official History of Australia in the Great War of 1914-1918*, Vol.IX, *The Royal Australian Navy 1914-1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934).

⁵ An early example of the 'denial' position is Gerhard Fischer, 'Negative Integration and an Australian Road to Modernity: Interpreting the Australian Homefront in World War 1', *Australian Historical Studies*, April 1995, particularly 455-7.

From the last decade of the nineteenth century the Asian-Pacific region became of increasing interest for Germany, primarily because it was the last area not fully annexed or controlled by other colonial powers. The historian Dietrich Schäfer wrote that the region was entering a new era of importance: 'The time is beginning in which events...will have at least the same world-political significance as in Europe or the Atlantic'.⁶ In the face of increasing challenge to the *status quo* and encroachments into what was considered Australia's 'back yard', it was regarded as vital to maintain British naval supremacy –on which Australasian security depended- and that commerce and communication routes should be secure. This supremacy was seen as the sole guarantee of Australian and New Zealand safety. Contemporary opinion saw no contradiction between nationalism and 'Imperialism'.⁷ It was a matter of practicality for the defence of the remote Dominions.

There were few doubts in the minds of contemporary observers of Great Power rivalries prior to 1914. In the years following the 'Dreadnought scare' of 1909 which began the battleship building race, German naval power loomed more ominously and the Dominions' isolated position and the safety of their maritime trade with Britain came more into popular focus. Even a brief perusal of sources such as the Parliamentary Debates and leading newspapers shows an intense level of concern. That this concern was totally justified is supported by previously unused German documentation, where well before the outbreak of the War, systematic German strategic planning for the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific is clearly elaborated.

The Navy as the instrument of expansionist policy

What then is the real significance of the function of the East Asian Cruiser Squadron? An important aspect of Germany's extensive world-political aims saw the Imperial Navy as an instrument of foreign policy playing a central part. With the overwhelming superiority of the Royal Navy ensuring the domination of the world's trade routes, and thus in German eyes able to influence if not limit their economic and political expansion, there appeared to be no alternative but to engage Britain if Germany were to attain her rightful place on the world stage and flourish. To understand the German rationale it is crucial to consider the *Weltanschauung* of academic thought, economic determinism, the inexorable advance of 'higher cultures' and Germany's 'divinely ordained' mission to the world with the anticipated redistribution of spheres of influence. These views were formulated and propagated by the academic elite, particularly historians and economists whose political and social influence was considerable.⁸



Equally important is the thinking of leading naval men in Germany. Alfred von Tirpitz, State Secretary of the Naval Office and 'father' of the battleship fleet,

⁶ Dietrich Schäfer, *Kolonialgeschichte* (Leipzig: G.J. Goschen'sche Buchhandlung, 1906), 142.

⁷ The contemporary understanding of the term is intended: one who supported the expansion of British power and cultural influence, and the maintenance of British naval supremacy as the guarantor of Australasian security. This is not to deny the influences of the Irish/Catholic position-but it was a minority one.

⁸ For insights into the Lutheran theological underpinnings, see John Moses' chapters in J. Moses & P. Overlack, *First know your enemy. Comprehending Imperial German war aims & deciphering the enigma of Kultur*, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2019),

was a student of Heinrich von Treitschke⁹ and believed in the inevitability of Germany's expansion from a Continental to a world power position. How could this best be achieved? The examples of history proved that a maritime power could not be defeated by *guerre de course* -cruiser (commerce) warfare then popular in naval circles- as long as its battle fleet remained unconquered.¹⁰ This led to the German battleship construction program begun in 1897 and directed against Britain. However, the rôle of cruisers remained specific and their tasks for commerce warfare were planned in detail by the Admiralty Staff, which in the years before 1914 intensively focused on the problems of conducting large scale operations on all the world's trade routes. These plans occupy many folios in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (German Federal Military Archive) in Freiburg. These are no theoretical musings but concrete and comprehensively researched and considered operational plans to interdict supplies of raw materials intended for Britain, with frequent annotations and comments in the Kaiser's own handwriting.

Writing in 1910, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the American navalist who deeply influenced Tirpitz' thinking, stated that 'completely disorganizing the conditions of business' constituted a decisive aim: 'To bring the pressure of war to bear upon the whole population...is the very spirit of modern warfare.'¹¹ Adopted as a German objective in a conflict with Britain, this clearly put the export trade and communication lines of the Dominions under threat. German activity needs to be placed in a broad context, dominated by the concept of *Weltpolitik*. This was a term used constantly and implies more than its literal translation of 'world policy'.



Kaiser Wilhelm II used the term in a speech in January 1896 commemorating the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Empire. *Weltpolitik* was the transfer of the policy of the European balance of power to the world at large. Its essence was emphasis on expansion and strength as meaningful goals in themselves. However, contemporary Germans understood the term to refer to policy and particularly to economic-political ideology based on Social-Darwinist concepts that Germany had to expand in order to compete, or go under in the face of a British challenge. First as Foreign Secretary then as Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow provided a rationale in his *Imperial Germany* published in English in 1914.¹² An understanding of such concepts, propagated first among the educated elite and later in a 'down market' version for the masses, is essential to understand why Germany was interested in expanding and consolidating its position in Asia and the Pacific.

Knowledge of the war plans of the East Asian Cruiser Squadron as an instrument of German foreign policy throws not only considerable light on that nation's intentions to become a world power generally, but also provides valuable insight into German assessment of the wartime value of the resource rich self-governing British Dominions. It is this which brings focus on the threat to Australia with the planned interdiction of export

⁹ See for example K. H. Metz, (1982). 'The Politics of Conflict: Heinrich von Treitschke and the Idea of 'Realpolitik', *History of Political Thought*, 3 (2), 269–284. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26212237>; Johnathan Kilgour, 'Heinrich von Treitschke: Creating a German national mission' (2004). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. University of Montana, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2530>

¹⁰ This does not mean Tirpitz denied an important function for cruiser warfare. It was to work in tandem on overseas Stations to pressure Britain in support of the actions of the battleships of the High Seas Fleet in European waters.

¹¹ Letter from A. T. Mahan, *The Times (London)*, 4 November 1910, 15.

¹² Prince Bülow, *Imperial Germany* (London/New York: Cassell, 1914).

trade and even bombardment of port facilities.¹³ The whole history of Germany in the Pacific is relevant given this ongoing debate as to whether or not there was a real threat to Australia and New Zealand in 1914, and of their participation in the First World War. Were naïve colonials duped into fighting for Britain in what was an 'imperialist trade war', or were there deeper issues about which Australasian politicians, the press, and the educated public were keenly aware? The answer is in the affirmative.

A threat recognised

This also gives rise to the question of whether there was a necessary conflict between British Imperial and Dominion interests. A neutral examination of contemporary sources clearly shows that -on the question of defence at least- there was not. The evidence proves conclusively that there was a threat, and that contemporaries saw no necessary conflict of interests- indeed their security was seen to be intimately connected to the maintenance of British naval supremacy and to British success in any conflict. The German presence in Asia and the Pacific was regarded by both Imperialists¹⁴ and an influential element of politicians and the press as a real and imminent threat ever since the first German activity in the Pacific islands was loudly condemned by Colonial politicians in the 1870s.¹⁵

I have drawn extensively on previously unpublished documents in the German Federal Military Archive in Freiburg and the Foreign Office and Colonial Office archives. The operational plans of the German Navy for Asia, and the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions have lain virtually untouched and have not been examined comprehensively before. These clearly state war aims which centred on attacking merchant shipping to cut the export of raw materials and foodstuffs from East Asia, Australasia, and India to Britain. This was to be implemented in tandem with similar activity on the trade routes from Canada and South America. Included were cruiser attacks against specific Australian ports and engagements with Australian naval forces. This activity also would force the detachment of considerable British naval forces to distant parts of the world, providing relief for German naval actions in European waters. In conjunction with similar operations in other parts of the world, the aim of commerce warfare was to weaken Britain economically and force it to an early peace on German terms. Indeed, the vulnerability of trade routes to attack in wartime was regarded by German naval planners as the Achilles' heel by which Britain could be crippled economically and quickly brought to terms in a European war. The compelling evidence for the gravity of the Dominions' position is in the voluminous folios of operational plans for attacks on shipping in Dominion waters and on trade routes out of the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁶

As the historian Paul Kennedy pointed out, a study of operational planning before 1914 is of particular importance because it was the first time that war plans were formulated in a systematic manner in peacetime on a scale hitherto unknown.¹⁷ The expressed intentions of the German documents make clear that the merchant trade of Britain, its Dominions and its allies would be a prime target. Germany saw itself justified in adopting 'all measures by which we can affect the general economic life of England'

¹³ See P. Overlack, 'Commerce Warfare in an Anglo-German Conflict before World War 1', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.20, No.4, December 1997.

¹⁴ Used in the contemporary understanding that Australian security was inextricably bound up with that of the wider British Empire.

¹⁵ See P. Overlack, 'Bless the Queen and Curse the Colonial Office: Australasian Reaction to German Expansion in the Pacific to 1900', *Journal of Pacific History*, 33/2, 1998.

¹⁶ See P. Overlack, 'Asia in German Naval Planning before the First World War', *War & Society*, Vol. 17 (1), May 1999; 'German War Plans in the Pacific, 1900-1914', *The Historian* (Michigan State University Press), Vol.60, No.3, Spring 1998.

¹⁷ P.M. Kennedy (Ed.) *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 1-2.

and thus influence its capacity to continue fighting.¹⁸ The Navy had a very specific part in achieving this. While the Army regarded Germany as essentially a Continental power, the Navy under the Kaiser and Tirpitz saw it reaching out as a world.

It was the work of Eckhart Kehr in the 1920s which first showed how the military-aristocratic-industrial alliance set out to prepare Germany for what was considered an inevitable clash with Britain.¹⁹ The contributions of Ludwig Dehio to the immediate post-1945 re-examination of Germany's past clearly indicated that with its systematic armaments program, Germany was determined to alter the world balance of power.²⁰ There is no escaping the effect this would have had on the British Empire and particularly the Pacific Dominions. The main works of Volker Berghahn remain a first reference for the intentions of Tirpitz and provide a mass of detail on naval expansion.²¹ Subsequently Holger Herwig's studies of naval expansion are an invaluable source for considerations of naval policy and its implications, as are the works of Jonathan Steinberg and Ivo Lambi on the ideology behind it.²² The prolific work of Paul Kennedy provides sweeping surveys on a global scale, and poses challenging questions about causation and specific developments and their effects. All of these broader issues need to be taken into consideration when examining why and how Germany became so involved in the Asian-Pacific region.

The actual implementation of commerce warfare against British and Dominion shipping was the task of the East Asian Cruiser Squadron based at the port of Tsingtao (Qingdao) in the 'leased territory' of Kiautschou (Jiaozhou) in northern China which Germany acquired in 1897. It was tightly organised into regional Stations with assigned light cruisers, while the heavy armoured cruisers -notably *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the immediate prewar years- ranged over the enormous expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In wartime these ships were to attack merchant vessels and to a limited extent coastal fortifications, with the aim of halting exports to Britain by the Suez, Cape, and South American routes. The conduct of successful commerce warfare was dependent on strategically located bases, which at the time Germany did not possess in adequate number. Aggressive attempts to obtain there led to friction, not only with Britain but also with the United States as both nations expanded their positions in Asia and the Pacific. Coaling and provisioning in wartime was essential for the effective operation of cruisers in the broad expanse over which the Squadron supported German interests. For over a decade before the turn of the century the German Navy had been surveying remote harbours and anchorages in the waters of Asia, the Netherlands Indies, New Guinea, the Pacific, and across to the Pacific coasts of North and South America. Contractual arrangements were made with German shipping companies to bring coal, food, and munitions from neutral and Australian harbours to the warships of the Cruiser Squadron before any official declaration of hostilities. These merchants vessels and the fast postal steamers of the North German Lloyd then would be converted into armed auxiliary

¹⁸ German Federal Military Archive (BAMA), RM5/v, 525, Admiralty Staff memorandum, 9 November 1914.

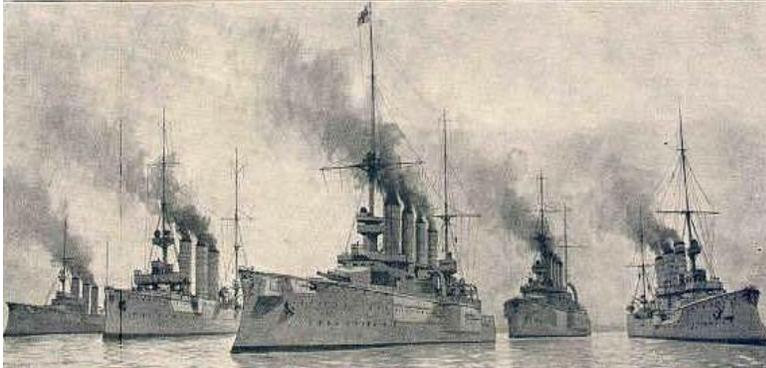
¹⁹ E. Kehr, *Schlachflottenbau und Parteipolitik 1894-1901. Versuch eines Querschnitts durch die innenpolitischen, sozialen und ideologischen Voraussetzungen des deutschen Imperialismus* (Berlin/Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1965); *Der Primat der Innenpolitik. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preußisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Ed. H.-U. Wehler, 2nd ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965).

²⁰ L. Dehio, 'Deutschland und die Epoche der Weltkriege' *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd.173, 1952, 72-94, subsequently *Deutschland und die Weltpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1961), in English as *Germany and World Politics in the Twentieth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959).

²¹ In particular *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971).

²² H. Herwig, *'Luxury Fleet'. The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980); J. Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent. Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London: Macdonald, 1965); I. N. Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862-1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

cruisers which would assist the warships of the Cruiser Squadron to wreak havoc on Australasian trade and shipping.



armoured cruiser SMS Scharnhorst in foreground.

East Asian Squadron depiction, flagship

The devil in the detail

Already by November 1901 the senior German naval officer on the Australian Station outlined detailed plans of attack. Postal steamers to be converted into armed auxiliaries were to be despatched secretly from Australian ports with coal and supplies for the warships at sea. Coal storages in Port Moresby, the Solomons, and other British possessions would be raided, and a temporary support base established on Thursday Island at the most northerly tip of Australia. Aggressive naval actions were foreseen for both the warships of the Squadron and fast postal steamers converted as 'auxiliary cruisers' against Australian shipping and harbours would cause panic among the population. This would force the Australian Navy to remain close to home, and not pose a threat to wider German operations attacking shipping in southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean routes to Suez. In one scenario, German warships stood before Sydney and Melbourne and if necessary engaged Australian forces -successfully it was assumed- before blockading the ports. The very presence of the German force confining merchant shipping to harbour, cutting exports and sending insurance rates skyrocketing would cause considerable economic and social disruption.

German plans were based on years of intensive research into local conditions and the state of Australasian defences. Where was their information obtained? The Naval Intelligence System (*Marine-Kriegsnachrichtenwesen*) was coordinated from the Consulates-General in major cities throughout the Asia-Pacific region. These men were an integral part of the Naval Intelligence System which functioned in regional zones throughout the Asian-Pacific region under the direction of naval officers. Honorary Consuls in lesser ports collected information on shipping movements and other useful data from agents under their direction, the 'Confidential Agents' (*Vertrauensmänner*) and 'Reporters' (*Berichterstatter*). The former were the Consuls themselves or prominent local Germans, the latter usually resident merchants, traders or members of the German community who cultivated useful links with Government and commercial circles. Information was collated in the Consulate-General and forwarded to Berlin. Each Consul was visited on a regular basis by one of the cruisers of the East Asian Squadron permanently detached to the local Station. The Consuls received specific instructions and were in possession of the top secret Naval Code. Previously it was thought that because no evidence was found in the offices or homes of the German Consuls and businessmen in the Dominions, these men, usually pillars of society, were unjustly accused and harshly treated by being interned. The contrary is the case. Agents had specific directives from the German Admiralty to destroy all papers and code books if in

danger of being exposed. This is the reason for lack of evidence *locally* which has been used to whitewash them.²³ The German archives show their willing involvement.



Much has been written about the demise of the Cruiser Squadron under its commander Vice-Admiral Maximilian Reichsgraf von Spee in the Battle of the Falkland Islands, but little consideration has been given to the Squadron's situation and options in August 1914, and the reasons for its limited operations. This is now rectified. Despite years of careful planning things did not go well. The speedy occupation of the German colonies denied the Cruiser Squadron crucial bases. The entry of Japan into the War and the prospect of facing the battle cruiser HMAS *Australia* forced Spee to move the Squadron to South American waters where it met its doom. However, this does not detract from the seriousness of the initial threat and the damage which would have been suffered had all gone well. Because the Squadron's whereabouts was unknown, and due to the widely publicised success of the *Emden*, considerable disruption to shipping and Australasian troop transports did eventuate. Above all, it has to be kept in mind what was *intended* to be achieved. The depredations of the *Emden* until its demise at the guns of the *Sydney*, and the successes of the raiders *Möwe*, *Wolf*, and *Seeadler* are but one example of the widespread damage which might well have been inflicted had events favoured Germany. Much new light is thrown on Spee's²⁴ deliberations in his letters to his wife which were forwarded after the successful Battle of Coronel by the Consul in Valparaiso.

Resources and evidence

There exists an enormous amount of reference material, both archival and printed. Two writers whose observations are pertinent to this study are the former naval officer, journalist and pan-German propagandist Ernst Graf zu Reventlow²⁵ who provided very perceptive insights into German policy, and Admiral Erich Raeder, one of the first to work from the original documents in his official naval war history.²⁶ The memoirs and political writings of a range of figures like Alfred von Tirpitz and Berhard von Bülow, and the Naval Attachés in London, provide insights into deliberations at the highest level.

The most useful information was obtained from the reports of the East Asian Squadron Chiefs and individual warship captains. The marginal comments on these, frequently in the Kaiser's hand with his thick blue pencil, show they were considered at the highest

²³ The view put by Gerhard Fischer, *Enemy Aliens. Internment and the Homefront Experience in Australia 1914-1920* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1989); and Raymond Evans, *Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Homefront, 1914-18* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

²⁴ I am indebted to the late Graf Max von Spee for access to this unpublished material in the family archive.

²⁵ Ernst zu Reventlow, *Deutschlands Auswärtige Politik, 1888-1914* (Berlin: Mittler, 1916); *Der Einfluß der Seemacht im Großen Kriege* (Berlin: Mittler, 1918).

²⁶ Erich Raeder, *Der Kreuzerkrieg in den ausländischen Gewässern*, Bd.1, *Das Kreuzergeschwader*, 2. Auflage, (Berlin: Mittler, 1927).

level. These folios also contain many useful annotated newspaper clippings, as do the Consular reports. Both the Political Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin and the Federal Archive in Berlin hold Consular reports, files on economic and policy matters relating to Asia and the Pacific. All these archives hold random duplicates of correspondence to and from the Navy Office, Foreign and Colonial Offices, and Admiralty Staff on matters of mutual concern. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates are a rich source of material for contemporary views on Australia's defence and the anticipated German threat. The holdings of the Australian Archives in Melbourne and Canberra, and the Australian War Memorial Archive flesh out the response to German activity in the region. The research is incomplete and much more will be revealed from the German archives in future years as relevant documents are identified, particularly with regard to intelligence gathering. Nevertheless, in my doctoral thesis²⁷ the full extent of planned German naval operations in the Asian-Pacific-Indian Ocean regions, an integral part of Germany's world-political strategy, was brought to light for the first time.

²⁷ History Department, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, 1995.