



### 3 Neptune in the service of the Empire: 'World Policy', Colonialism and the Navy in Wilhelmine Germany.

'The old century saw a German Europe; the new one shall see a German world. To attain that consummation two duties are required from the present German generation: to keep its own counsel and to create a strong naval force'. *Koloniale Zeitschrift*, 18 January 1900.

In 1897 German internal and foreign policy took a decisive turn. In that year, the men of Wilhelm II's 'personal rule' gained key administrative positions, although this move was partly obscured by the retention of the aged Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst as Chancellor.<sup>1</sup> With Bernhard von Bülow as Foreign Secretary, Alfred Tirpitz<sup>2</sup> as Navy Secretary, and Johannes von Miquel as Prussian Finance Minister, the Kaiser had the politicians he needed to implement his ambition of exerting a leading rôle in world affairs. In this scenario colonies had an ideological value conveying prestige and power which far outweighed their economic value.

The use of the German Navy -both battleships and cruisers- as an instrument of foreign policy in the context of economic and colonial development has been a somewhat neglected theme of historical research, yet its importance lies in its direct tie to the goal of achieving world-power status. Chief of the Naval Cabinet Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller stated in 1896 that world history was entering a period of economic conflict. In this Germany must have the goal of 'breaking British world hegemony and thus freeing necessary colonial possessions for the expansion of the middle-European states'.<sup>3</sup> Why was such a policy embarked upon, in full knowledge of all the risks entailed in challenging Britain? Without an

---

<sup>1</sup> Chlodwig Fürst zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst was Chancellor 1894-1900, when he was succeeded by Foreign Secretary Bernhard von Bülow. For underlying themes in this period see 'Government by Procrastination: Chancellor Hohenlohe and Kaiser William II, 1894-1900', *Central European History*, (7) 1974, 159-185.

<sup>2</sup> Tirpitz was not ennobled ('von') until 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Walther Görlitz (Ed.) *Der Kaiser...Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Marinekabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller über die Ära Wilhelms II* (Göttingen, 1965), 37.

examination of this question, Alfred von Tirpitz' life work dedicated to transforming the Navy into a power-political instrument appears as a senseless technical exercise. The solution lies in its connection with internal and external economic, political, and social factors.<sup>4</sup> This essay examines the intimate connection between navalism and an extensive economic and political drive overseas, which saw an aggressive expansionist agenda.



Tirpitz



Bülow



Miquel

### The contemporary dynamics

The mining and steel magnate Fritz Hammacher commented in late 1897 on the 'psychological connection which existed between the military capability of a state and the degree of economic activity and confidence'.<sup>5</sup> The dynamics of *Weltpolitik* have to be seen against the economic background of German history. The contemporary world view assumed a close relationship between economic activity and political power. The economist Karl Helfferich made a simple and clear connection when he spoke of 'our colonial and world-political tasks'.<sup>6</sup> This connection was easily justified in terms of defending national interests against threat, and since 1871 German commercial circles generally had shown support for the measures considered necessary by military experts.<sup>7</sup>

The Navy was to be the prime instrument to facilitate Germany's expansion from a Continental to a world power.<sup>8</sup> The explanation of the naval-colonial connection lies bluntly in the fact that Britain already possessed a world empire while Germany aimed to enter the ranks of the great colonial powers, by force if need be. With the rapid growth of German trade and industry as a justification for the nation's assumption of what was considered an appropriate position in the councils of the great nations, a strong Navy to promote German interests became a political necessity: 'We want to, and shall, make our national armed force at sea as strong as lies in our power'.<sup>9</sup> The naval programs of each country had

<sup>4</sup> As in Paul Dehn's *Von deutscher Kolonial- und Weltpolitik* (Berlin, 1907), especially the chapter 'Deutschlands Kolonialbedürfnis', 65f. Throughout this essay the emphasis is on economic and political rather than settlement colonialism.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in H. Jaeger, *Unternehmer in der deutschen Politik* (Bonn, 1967), 204.

<sup>6</sup> Bundesarchiv (BA), German Federal Archive, Koblenz, Nachlaß Helfferich, N1123/8, Karl Helfferich, 'Das Kolonialprogramm des Reichkanzlers', *National-Zeitung*, 11 December 1904.

<sup>7</sup> Jaeger, 300.

<sup>8</sup> On the move from great- to world-power see Gregor Schöllgen, 'Die Großmacht als Weltmacht.Idee, Wirklichkeit und Perzeption deutscher "Weltpolitik" im Zeitalter des Imperialismus', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 248, 1989, 79-100.

<sup>9</sup> BA Koblenz, N1123/8, *Deutsche Stimmen. Wochenblatt für die National-Liberale Partei*, 14

completely different functions. For Britain the expansion of its Navy was primarily defensive, protecting already existing world interests.<sup>10</sup> Germany intended to create such a power instrument in order to obtain a similar world empire. The implications were clear: the more Germany developed from an agrarian into an industrial state, the more the importance of overseas markets and the Navy came to the fore. Tirpitz' colleague and friend Admiral Adolf von Trotha saw the Navy as the 'expression and bearer of German national development'.<sup>11</sup> If the Army were the root of the national tree, the Navy formed the branches extending out into the world. Tirpitz' son later stated that naval construction was the attempt 'to underpin the economic expansion of the German Empire by creating a strong maritime power'.<sup>12</sup>

The Hanseatic companies in particular sought the protection of the state for their economic interests, and as they grew in size and influence, increasingly formulated their rationale around economic imperialism permeated by colonialism.<sup>13</sup> Although Bismarck's Continental policy required Germany to remain in the second rank of naval powers, the increasing acquisition of colonial territory and share of world export markets created an immediate mission for the Navy despite questions about its ultimate function. From 1895-6 a boom period gave new impulse to economic expansion. For commercial and economic circles searching for an appropriate power instrument to ensure their participation and survival at a world level, the Navy appeared an ideal means, coming to be seen as the all-encompassing solution to economic-political problems.<sup>14</sup>

### Economic interests and navalism



For the Navy there was only one solution- to embark on the path to world policy before the means to do so were lost. Tirpitz based his naval program on the expansion of German interests overseas, which appealed to influential commercial and industrial circles and in its later phase to broader sections of society. The importance of naval power for the success of commercial and shipping circles was so great that in September 1899 **Albert Ballin**, the influential director of the HAPAG-Lloyd shipping concern, submitted a justification for the necessity for the speedy strengthening of the Navy to the Kaiser, and proposed a submission to the Reichstag on behalf of the Hamburg Chamber of

---

October 1905.

<sup>10</sup> Elaborated in Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power. British Naval Policy 1880-1905* (London, 1940), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (BA-MA), Nachlaß Tirpitz, N253, K6, Trotha-Tirpitz, 25 August 1916, in V.R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer Innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* (Düsseldorf, 1971), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang von Tirpitz, 'Wie hat sich der Staatsbetrieb beim Aufbau der Flotte bewährt?', pamphlet (Leipzig, 1923), 10, cited in Berghahn, 133.

<sup>13</sup> See Klaus Bade, *Friedrich Fabri und der Imperialismus in der Bismarckzeit: Revolution-Depression-Expansion* (Freiburg, 1975), 102-5, 136-69.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Köln, 1969), 192f.; Woodruff Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York/Oxford, 1986), Chap. 2.

Commerce and the Shippers' Association.<sup>15</sup> It is no coincidence that such groups repeatedly called for naval expansion in their annual reports and in petitions to the Reichstag, and by virtue of their position as economic leaders had considerable impact on policy.<sup>16</sup>

The political economist Ernst von Halle, one of the leading academics to popularise naval power, applied it to the events of German history, with the bottom line that the development of the economy was dependent upon the possession and exercise of naval power.<sup>17</sup> Germany had to develop naval power if it wanted to secure a rôle in the coming redivision of the world's resources.<sup>18</sup> It had arrived late on the colonial scene and believed that its expanding economy increasingly was being denied access to sources of raw materials and to markets. Unsettling events in countries where large numbers of Germans had settled and German capital was invested showed the need for an effective naval presence. The generally accepted argument was that before Germany could think about acquiring an extensive colonial empire, it had to possess an appropriate power-political means to back up its claim to a just share of remaining territory, and to guarantee its participation in the world marketplace. In April 1898 Tirpitz composed a lengthy memorandum to the Kaiser, making clear that the nation's economic development was closely related to the development of its power-political position:

In the economic struggle in which the peoples will have to participate in the next century it will become ever more necessary to represent Germany's maritime interests with military power'.<sup>19</sup>

This new creed supplanted the existing Eurocentric view, pushing Germany out into the world with the Navy as an instrument to realise political and economic ambitions.

Any opposition was lost amid the enthusiasm which ensued following the commencement of the naval program in 1897.<sup>20</sup> It was the infusion of the naval idea that injected a new and aggressive dimension into the cautious Bismarckian colonial policy and transformed it into *Weltpolitik*. Only a strong Navy could exert pressure against those colonial and naval powers which threatened Germany's economic expansion. The Army clearly could only pressure Germany's Continental neighbours. It was powerless against economic measures from other maritime and colonial powers, and especially against blockade in wartime. In the age of world-policy the Army alone no longer sufficed. Only a strong Navy could guard German maritime interests in the manner the Army had done for its land interests at Sedan and Metz.<sup>21</sup> If the Army had been the basis of German national rebirth, then the

---

<sup>15</sup> German Foreign Office Archive Bonn (PA-AA), Deutschland 138, Bd. 16, Metternich-Richthofen, 21 September 1899; also in Kehr, 213f.

<sup>16</sup> See the seminal research of Eckart Kehr, *Schlachtflottenbau und Parteipolitik 1894-1901* (Vaduz, 1965), 242f. (facsimile of the original edition), 239f.

<sup>17</sup> E. von Halle, *Die Seemacht in der deutschen Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1907); also see the author's essay 'The Imperial Navy, the Academics, and Germany's World Mission', in A. Bonnell, G. Munro, & M. Travers (Eds) *Power, Conscience, and Opposition. Essays in Honour of John A. Moses* (New York/Bern, 1996), 3-24.

<sup>18</sup> For the ongoing implications of this see V. Berghahn & W. Deist, 'Kaiserliche Marine und Kriegsausbruch 1914', *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 1, 1970, 39ff.

<sup>19</sup> Tirpitz-Kaiser, 24 April 1898, *ibid.*, 441.

<sup>20</sup> Kehr, *op.cit.* The level of support from commerce and industry is also noted in the Kaiser's marginal comment in German Foreign Office Archive (PA-AA), Deutschland 138, Bd. 2, 'Bericht des Preußischen Gesandten in Bayern vom 2.1.1899'.

<sup>21</sup> G. Schmoller, A. Sering, A. Wagner (Eds) *Handels-und Machtpolitik. Reden und Aufsätze im Auftrage der Freien Vereinigung für Flottenvorträge* (Stuttgart, 1900), I, 118..

Navy was to be the cradle of the national future.<sup>22</sup> As the influential political economist Gustav Schmoller indicated, '...in the era of world-policy, the Army alone no longer suffices'.<sup>23</sup> A naval expert commented that the Army was not in a position to protect overseas trade and the merchant fleet, and could not guarantee the prosperity of the rapidly increasing population of the nation. What was urgently required was 'protection and fostering of our world trade and colonial development'.<sup>24</sup> Tirpitz cleverly connected a justification for naval expansion with real or supposed defence necessities, thus emphasising the Navy's defensive rather than offensive character. In this manner he was able to gain the support of wider circles than normally would have been attracted to *Weltpolitik*. A refined propaganda campaign ensured that the widest exposure and effect was obtained.<sup>25</sup>

A contemporary American observer noted that German imperialism 'is only possible by reason of the great banking interest which is not only identical with, but is the basic incentive to, the Emperor's over-sea and colonial policy'.<sup>26</sup> Ballin, after a visit to Britain in 1910, reported to the Kaiser that if the British did not have the power of capital and a stream of gold from their colonies, because of their complacency 'they would soon be a *quantité négligeable* for us in world markets'.<sup>27</sup> Support for a strong Navy came particularly from the large shippers; by the turn of the century 6% of firms controlled 75% of German tonnage.<sup>28</sup> Under these circumstances the influence of Ballin and Heinrich Wiegand of the North German Lloyd was considerable. Both were admirers of Tirpitz. It was also no coincidence that agitation for a strong navy found fertile ground at a time of economic boom whose duration was uncertain. The legislative fixing of naval expansion was intended to provide a stabilising element which could be calculated years in advance. This approach was supported by a broad section of commercial and industrial circles who were becoming increasingly alarmed at the rise of the working class political movement, a factor considered in due course. Even the strong free trade centres of Hamburg and Bremen came around, as their merchants increasingly encountered protectionist measures and difficulty in accessing overseas markets. Those circles which had direct or indirect maritime interests now advocated state protection of their existence.<sup>29</sup>

In December 1905 Bülow stated in the Reichstag that so-called militarism was the prerequisite for economic progress, while the naval yearbook *Nauticus* maintained that only adequate naval power would maintain access to world markets.<sup>30</sup> That this was primarily directed against Britain's naval and economic preeminence had long been clear: Chief of the Naval Cabinet Admiral Gustav von Senden-Bibran stated in 1899 that a new division of the world was occurring, 'The political constellations are continually changing, they can also change to England's disadvantage'.<sup>31</sup> The writer Paul Dehn noted that

<sup>22</sup> *Nauticus. Jahrbuch für Deutschlands Seeinteressen*, (Berlin, 1899), 428.

<sup>23</sup> Schmoller, I, 118.

<sup>24</sup> A. Wislicenus cited in J. Meyer *Die Propaganda der deutschen Flottenbewegung 1897-1900* (Bern, 1967), 188, in Berghahn, 253.

<sup>25</sup> On the manipulation of public opinion see Wilhelm Deist, *Flottenpolitik und Flottenpropaganda. Das Nachrichtenbüro des Reichsmarineamtes 1897-1914* (Stuttgart, 1976).

<sup>26</sup> A. Harrison, 'The German Press', *North American Review*, August 1907, 731.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hulderman, *Albert Ballin* (London, 1967), 437.

<sup>28</sup> Schmoller, II, 129.

<sup>29</sup> See Berghahn, 138-141.

<sup>30</sup> Bernhard Fürst von Bülow, *Reden* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1910-14), IV, 56; *Nauticus. Jahrbuch für Deutschlands Seeinteressen 1900*, (Berlin, Mittler, 1900), 51.

<sup>31</sup> BA-MA, Nachlaß Senden, N160/3, 'Stellungnahme betr. Geschwaderkrieg', n.d., in

Those aims England has formulated for itself will be difficult to attain. It would be more practical to come to an agreement with the strongest power-Germany...With its strong fleet England indeed has a powerful instrument at hand, but more an instrument of threat than deed.<sup>32</sup>

The German Navy was constructed to match this, and to force Britain to negotiate, enabling Germany to access world markets and diplomatic councils on an equal footing. In a reversal of the existing cruiser dominated naval policy, crucially influenced by the American Alfred Thayer Mahan,<sup>33</sup> Tirpitz believed only battleships were the means to deliver the requisite power to counteract Germany's increasingly restricted economic and world-diplomatic situation. He stated clearly in a memorandum for the Kaiser that

The central cause of a war between Britain and Germany will be an economic one: the increasing English necessity to confine Germany's commercial and industrial development and thus neutralise its disturbing competition in both areas. These are Britain's object of attack: German trade and German industry...<sup>34</sup>

As Tirpitz put it, the Navy 'never seemed to me to be an end in itself but always a function of those maritime interests'.<sup>35</sup> He presented a simple rationale: only when the German Navy posed a sufficient threat to the Royal Navy would Britain acknowledge Germany's claim to world-power status. The Navy was to become an instrument to neutralise Britain's objections to German economic and colonial expansion and to ensure diplomatic gains and commercial survival, for a nation unequivocally dependent on access to the sea. The newly united Germany was destined to expand into the world just as Prussia had expanded into Germany. Tirpitz presented this in terms of power politics and the defence of essential interests:

Germans did not realise that our development on the broad back of British free trade and the British world empire would continue only until it was stopped. The 'open door', which could so easily be closed, combined with our hemmed-in and dangerous Continental position, strengthened me in my conviction that no time was to be lost...<sup>36</sup>

R.J.S. Hoffmann in the 1930s advanced the proposal that the growth of German trade and the ensuing competition with Britain was 'perhaps even *the* basic cause for the anti-German orientation of British world-policy', and Paul Kennedy decidedly observed that the most profound cause of the Anglo-German rivalry indeed was economic.<sup>37</sup> This highlights the importance of the link between economic policy and naval expansion as its means of implementation. Tirpitz recounted that Lord Palmerston had once threatened to treat a German warship as if it were a pirate, which for Tirpitz summed up the British attitude towards German aspirations. There was but one solution: 'If Germany wants to live, it must take to the sea, and if it wants this, then it requires sea power'. There were only two possibilities for

---

Berghahn, 181.

<sup>32</sup> P. Dehn, *Von deutscher Kolonial- und Weltpolitik* (Berlin, 1907), 329-30.

<sup>33</sup> There are numerous works on Mahan, the most recent is by Jon Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: the Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore/London, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> BA-MA, Nachlaß Büchsel, N168/8, 'Immediatvortrag:Krieg England u. Deutschland', n.d., cited in Berghahn, 335.

<sup>35</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (London, 1919), I, 58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>37</sup> R.J.S. Hoffmann, *Great Britain and the German Trade Rivalry 187-1914* (New York, 1964), 303; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London/Boston, 1980), 464.

Germany: either to accept the inevitable defeat of a weak Navy, or to expand it so that it had a real chance of victory in any conflict. Over time Tirpitz came to the conviction that it could not be avoided to 'create for ourselves real world-political freedom through the construction of a fleet'. Thus the Navy was an instrument of 'legitimate maritime interests'. To this there was but one alternative which was unacceptable: to suffer a decline of trade and industry, mass emigration, and the loss of overseas influence. Germany would regress to a poor agricultural country.<sup>38</sup>

In this Tirpitz' thinking was wholly in tune with that of the times, which saw a glorious future ahead. *Nauticus* wrote in 1900 that 'Without a strong fleet Germany will not be able to possess any colonies by the end of the twentieth century, stifled in its limited area...or be smothered by the great world powers...'<sup>39</sup> In view of the perceived dangers to Germany's economic future, for Tirpitz there was but one solution, 'without loss of time and systematically' to promote German maritime interests vigorously. Only in this way would maritime trade, transatlantic exports, colonies, and *Deutschtum* be able to flourish.<sup>40</sup>

Holger Herwig provides substantial evidence that the Admiralty Staff did develop an identifiable policy of acquiring overseas bases (*Stützpunktpolitik*), which Tirpitz then adopted on becoming Naval Secretary.<sup>41</sup> Similar work has been done by Willi Boelcke which reinforces the Navy's function as an active instrument of foreign policy, something obscured in the more technical works on Tirpitz' battleship program. He outlines the Navy's specific political implementation in the Balkan Wars from 1912, in Haiti, Mexico, the Danish West Indies, Chile, and Brazil. Its world wide activity and innumerable surveys of possible base sites were a prominent theme of reports well into the prewar decade.<sup>42</sup> The intense interest in potential colonies and naval bases and coaling stations exhibited in the contemporary literature reflected the economic and political pressures for commercial and territorial expansion. Tirpitz' focus on the battleship program did not imply a rejection of the Navy's overseas political function. Rather it was a practical acceptance that resources were limited and a battleship fleet was the surest way to 'lever' Britain into accepting German world-political demands. The High Seas Fleet was the *first* step in a comprehensive program ending with the construction of a world-viable Navy commensurate with the exercise of a 'world-policy' to facilitate and underpin economic expansion.

The adoption of an expansionist colonial policy, the rapid development of German overseas economic interests, the Kaiser's determination to build a strong Navy, agitation from the nationalist press, the need for a common cause to integrate the disparate groups in German society, were the forces compelling Germany into *Weltpolitik*. It was also something mystical and essential to the continued health of the nation. One colonialist writer predicted that

Only those powers which are in a position to protect their sea traffic...and secure sufficient markets for their trade can share in the international contest...with any result. Not entering such a contest, or failing in it,

---

<sup>38</sup> Tirpitz, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, 12-13, 50, 57, 167.

<sup>39</sup> *Nauticus. Jahrbuch für Deutschlands Seeinteressen*, 1900, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Tirpitz-Stosch, 21 December 1895, cited in Ulrich von Hassell, *Tirpitz. Sein Leben und Wirken mit Berücksichtigung seiner Beziehungen zu Albrecht von Stosch* (Stuttgart, 1920), 103; see also Tirpitz, *Memoirs*, I, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Holger Herwig, *Politics of Frustration. The United States in German Naval Planning 1889-1941* (Boston, 1976).

<sup>42</sup> Willi Boelcke, 'Die Marine als Werkzeug preußisch-deutscher Außen- und Außenwirtschafts-Politik', *Marine Rundschau*, Bd.78 (10), 1981, 557-61.

means not only inevitable political ruin, but also a complete social deterioration, atrophy, and spiritual stagnation.<sup>43</sup>

The times were ripe with allegory. Tirpitz wrote that without sea power, Germany's position in the world resembled that of a mollusc without its shell. His views on international relations were cast in a mould of biological determinism, believing that nations lived in a 'state of nature', he drew from this premise the conclusion that security was not to be found in alliance systems but in national self-sufficiency.<sup>44</sup> The Social Darwinist view of national interests and policy had considerable influence. Unless Germany acquired the colonies, spheres of influence, coaling stations and naval bases requisite for world power status, unless her economic expansion and exercise of political influence equalled that of the other powers, it was feared that she would become a second rate quantity in world politics, and suffer internal atrophy. The aim of policy had to be to ensure economic prosperity and 'transform...our world-policy into a really independent position in the world'.<sup>45</sup> The threads of economic pressures, social imperialism, and expansionism were inextricably entwined.

The Colonial Society helped to finance the naval propaganda campaign, and provided space to naval propagandists in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* and speaking time at meetings. In these basic ways the Society played a significant part in getting the naval campaign off the ground.<sup>46</sup> The speed with which the Colonial Society moved to support naval construction reinforced the popular image of a necessary link between sea power, colonies, and world status. Only when Germany freed itself from the Continent could it become a world power. Colonialism was the means and naval power was the key to empire. Johannes von Miquel recognised the far reaching consequences and the hopes embodied in the naval program: 'The expansion of the German fleet is a similar question to the reform of the Prussian Army...At that time opponents denigrated this reform as Prussia's "great power aspiration"; today one speaks of Germany's "world power aspirations" ...'<sup>47</sup>

### **Colonial-naval aspirations and growing Anglo-German antagonism**

Walter Rathenau wrote in 1913 that 'We must continue to obtain what is necessary from future redivisions until such time as we are satisfied to approximately the same extent as our neighbours'.<sup>48</sup> Prior to the turn of the century points of aggravation between Germany and Britain included the division of African territory, German entry into China, Turkey, Samoa and other Pacific issues under pressure from the self-governing colonies, and German interference in the Transvaal issue. After 1900 the main areas of contention increased markedly on the periphery: the strategic implications of the Baghdad Railway and German economic penetration of Persia, and the Moroccan question. That German activity impinged on British interests so often was due to that nation's rapid economic and industrial advance, and the imperative to expand into the world and to 'flex diplomatic muscle'.

---

<sup>43</sup> Richard Deeken, *Manuia Samoa* (Oldenbourg, 1901), iii.

<sup>44</sup> Tirpitz, *Memoirs*, I, 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>46</sup> On the colonial and naval pressure groups see Smith, 52ff; Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right. Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven/London, 1980), 68ff; Kehr, *Schlachtflottenbau*, 208ff;

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Rathenau, 'Deutsche Gefahre und neue Ziele', *Neue Freie Presse*, 25 December 1913, in G. Hardach, *The First World War 1914-1918* (Berkeley, 1977), 8.

Another costly major misconception occurred with the 1898 Anglo-German agreement to settle African colonial issues. This was beneficial for both parties, however, it brought a series of misunderstandings, mainly because Germany envisioned the agreement as a new stage in bilateral relations and as a prelude to an Anglo-German Alliance.<sup>49</sup> Thus, German diplomats ignored important historical precepts set by the British 'Splendid Isolation' policy and instead continued to push for a formal alliance which Britain rejected. Despite British willingness to enter into a less formal cooperation entente with Germany, Wilhelm II rejected such informality and again demanded a formal alliance with legal binding. Consequently, Britain rejected any type of accord with Germany.

The advocates of German economic colonialism saw naval expansion as a useful tool in support of worldwide industrial and commercial expansion.<sup>50</sup> There was an increasing desire in colonial and academic circles, fostered by the Navy Office, to develop and use the Navy as a decisive instrument of world policy. Germany increasingly came to regard Britain as a disruptive influence on the Continental powers, and at the same time Britain seemed everywhere to block Germany's attempts to make colonial gains in Africa and the Pacific, and to increase its own influence on world affairs. Tirpitz' confidant Admiral Adolf von Trotha saw Germany's economic progress remaining endangered for as long as it was dependent on British cooperation and goodwill.<sup>51</sup> For colonialists the growth of German industry and the securing of markets and sources of raw materials were key aims whose future appeared increasingly constrained. Schmoller stated bluntly that in the final analysis, 'behind our merchants, behind our merchant navy, there must stand the *ultima ratio regum*. The world does not operate by other means'.<sup>52</sup> With this prognosis, the Navy became an increasingly important factor in assuring Germany's access to and safe retention of sources of supply and world markets. There was an entrenched belief that Britain was blocking German colonial expansion. Particularly in the 1890s it appeared to frustrate Germany's expressed wish to benefit from the looming breakup of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, and to create areas of economic and political influence in the Near East, Asia, and (with the United States) in Central and South America.<sup>53</sup>

There is clear enough evidence in the private papers of Tirpitz and others to indicate their firm belief in a new division of the world in power-political terms, and that it was imperative for Germany to take a leading part in this process. Given the widespread Social Darwinist belief in the struggle for existence among nations as well as in nature, it was inevitable that this came to have special meaning for the Navy as well. This is exemplified in a letter from the Director of the Kiel shipyards Huno von Ahlefeld to Tirpitz:

The "struggle for existence" takes place between individuals, provinces, parties, states. The latter can implement it either with weapons or in the economic sphere -we can do nothing to change this- ergo we implement it. Who does not participate goes under.

---

<sup>49</sup> See *inter alia* J. D. Vincent-Smith, 'The Anglo-German Negotiations over the Portuguese Colonies in Africa, 1911-14', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Sep., 1974), 620-629.

<sup>50</sup> *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (DKZ), 9 January 1892, 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> A. von Trotha, *Großadmiral von Tirpitz. Flottenbau und Reichsgedanke* (Breslau, 1931), 24.

<sup>52</sup> Schmoller, *Handels-und Machtpolitik*, I, 35.

<sup>53</sup> As one example of friction: R. Langhorne, 'Anglo-German Negotiations concerning the Future of the Portuguese Colonies, 1911-1914', *The Historical Journal*, XVI, (No.2, June 1973), 361-387.

Ahlefeld and others were strongly influenced by Tirpitz' world-view. He wrote that 'you provided the seeds [of these thoughts], and I have to thank you for my entire philosophical development'.<sup>54</sup> This speaks volumes for Tirpitz' charismatic influence on the leaders of industry and trade. He was convinced that Britain was an ageing and declining world power whose overseas commitments could not be met in the face of the strength of those 'new' nations, of which Germany was the first. This is an important concept which was adopted at the top levels of government. Kurt Riezler, political aide to Chancellor Theodor von Bethmann Hollweg, and in many respects a liberal, wrote in 1914: 'The German economy by its interests and achievements penetrated the world...The economic interest had to be followed by the political. The enormous economic achievement of a rising nation propels the young Empire into Weltpolitik'.<sup>55</sup> In addition Britain was becoming increasingly isolated, a position which, it was believed, would only firm to German advantage in the future. A strong Navy would provide the means to negate British objections to Germany's increasing influence in world affairs.

The naval writer Gustav Erdmann outlined some of the assumptions which underpinned the whole naval expansion program. The critical issue was that which Britain wished to prevent at all costs: a challenge to its assumption of unqualified supremacy over what were ostensibly free waters, and to maintain an all-encompassing control which would enable British wishes and interests to be secured, and if necessary, the ability to defeat every foreign attempt at competition. Britain sought 'to dictate absolutely in politics and economics...the German danger lies nearest and from strategic grounds is easier to combat...' However the German Navy was the ideal instrument with which to neutralise British naval supremacy and provide Germany with free access to the world.<sup>56</sup> The idea of using the Navy as a power-political instrument against Britain implied acceptance of the idea of a future conflict. From the other side of the Channel, at a time when the idea of economic strength through Imperial federation was being promoted, a writer in the widely-read journal *Nineteenth Century* charged Germany with having 'deliberately endeavoured to drive a wedge between Great Britain and our Colonies, and to prevent the unification of the British Empire'.<sup>57</sup>

In Germany, the view of Britain's world empire as a conspiracy strangling German economic growth and thus preventing world-political influence gained credence. Tirpitz' tour of duty as Chief of the East Asian Cruiser Division in 1895-6 had provided him with firsthand experience of Anglo-German economic rivalry in a rapidly expanding market and region of increasing strategic importance. It not only firmly convinced him that in the future a nation's rank would be determined by its participation in imperialistic ventures such as colonies and trade, but that Britain was developing into a rival which would not hesitate to crush the newcomer before the challenge it posed became too great. Tirpitz found himself facing an apparently unavoidable escalation of tension: 'In the process of moving out expansively, we encounter existing and future interests...How will the cleverest policy...now achieve anything without real power proportionate to those interests? World-politically, only naval power is versatile'.<sup>58</sup>

The question then arises, what conceptions did Tirpitz develop about the outcome of this power struggle? Undoubtedly it included war as a legitimate

---

<sup>54</sup> BA-MA, Nachlaß Tirpitz, N253, Bd.16, Ahlefeld-Tirpitz, 12 February 1898.

<sup>55</sup> Kurt Riezler, *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik* (Stuttgart, 1914), 102.

<sup>56</sup> Gustav Erdmann, *Die Kreuzerfrage* (Berlin, 1912), 12-13.

<sup>57</sup> J. Ellis Barker, 'The Future of Anglo-German Relations', *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol.59, April 1906; similarly 'The Foreign Policy of Germany', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol.78, 1905.

<sup>58</sup> Tirpitz, *Memoirs*, I, 55.

means. As Tirpitz observed in his *Politische Dokumente*, 'War is the continuation of policy'.<sup>59</sup>



Bethmann Hollweg, Chancellor from 1909, summed up the Kaiser's foreign policy thus: 'His basic and primary idea is to destroy England's position in the world to the advantage of Germany; therefore...we need a navy...'<sup>60</sup> If Germany wished to carry out a decisive and effective overseas policy and gain valuable colonies, it must be prepared for a clash with Britain and/or the United States.<sup>61</sup> It was clear that in the long term a struggle with Britain was accepted as unavoidable. Naval power clearly was related to world power. A state which had maritime and world interests had to be able to represent them and to make its power felt beyond territorial waters. It must be remembered that Tirpitz and Bülow were thinking in terms of at least a decade in the future, and given Anglo-Russian frictions in the Near and Far East and on the Indian border, they expected war between the two before that time. By then the German Navy would have the advantage. By the turn of the century when Tirpitz' ambitions were so entrenched in public policy, attempts to work out a compromise with Britain in naval matters became increasingly difficult.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Navy and foreign policy.**

In early 1899 Tirpitz wrote that in the coming century, in view of power developments in the Americas and Asia, the Navy would steadily increase in importance not just for defence, but for the whole of German foreign policy, so 'everything must occur to obtain and maintain a strong fleet'.<sup>63</sup> Under Wilhelm II colonialism came to mean the idea of a world rôle for Germany, one worthy of her industrial, technological, military and cultural strength. Behind this lay the idea expressed by Max Weber in his inaugural address to students at Freiburg University in 1895: that the foundation of the Reich would have been folly if it had not been intended to lay the foundations for further expansion.<sup>64</sup> Germany's free expansion was limited by Britain's world domination, and would be threatened by further limitation. Germany needed the means to defend its own interests.

---

<sup>59</sup> Tirpitz, *Politische Dokumente*, I, 204. On the growing war-mentality see Jost Düllfer & Klaus Holl (Eds), *Bereit zum Krieg. Kriegsmoralität im wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890-1914* (Göttingen, 1986).

<sup>60</sup> R. Vierhaus (Ed.) *Am Hof der Hohenzollern. Aus dem Tagebuch der Baronin Spitzemberg 1865-1914* (München, 1965), 210, entry for 14 March 1903. Also useful is P. M. Kennedy, 'The Kaiser and German Weltpolitik: reflexions on Wilhelm II's place in the making of German foreign policy', in John Röhl & Nicholas Sombart (Eds), *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations. The Corfu Papers* (Cambridge, 1982), 143-168.

<sup>61</sup> See Herwig's *Politics of Frustration*.

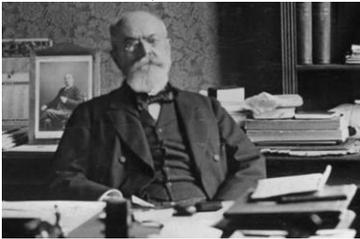
<sup>62</sup> On the growing war-mentality see Jost Düllfer & Klaus Holl (Eds), *Bereit zum Krieg. Kriegsmoralität im wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890-1914* (Göttingen, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> BA-MA, Nachlaß Heeringen, 7619, II, Tirpitz-Miquel, 8 February 1899, in Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Andreas Hillgruber, *Deutschlands Rolle in der Vorgeschichte der beiden Weltkriege* (Göttingen, 1967), 9.

It is probable that until the time of his appointment to the Foreign Office, Bülow still thought in terms of traditional Continental policy. The breakthrough to world-political concepts appears to have occurred in August 1897, during discussion of naval-political questions when he encountered Tirpitz' ambition to forge the Navy into an effective power instrument. A corollary of this would be Germany's ability to match Britain everywhere in the world and to build up a colonial empire without fear of opposition.<sup>65</sup> Only when the naval program was complete could Germany participate equally with other imperialist powers.

Tirpitz advocated using Germany's Continental hegemony simultaneously with broader expansion in order to lay the foundations for an overseas power position, the only thing which would provide equal status with other world powers. A stepped, progressive expansion -first Continental, then overseas- was excluded if only because the construction of the requisite power instrument, the Navy, was anticipated to take two decades. In view of the rapid economic development and expansion of the likely powers of the twentieth century, primarily Russia and America, there was little time remaining for Germany to establish its claim. Once Germany possessed naval power, it could guarantee both its Continental and world position as the first inheritor to a declining Britain's assumed abdication of world power. As members of the Government believed privately, and Pan-Germans asserted publicly, if Britain were not accommodating in coming to a colonial settlement, some form of leverage would have to be applied. It was a fine balance.



In 1897, Friedrich von Holstein, Political Secretary to the Foreign Office who considerably shaped foreign policy, saw three options for Germany to solve its internal conflicts: success in a European war, overseas acquisitions, or a world-political game of chance.<sup>66</sup> By the end of the first half decade of the new century the first two were unrealistic options; a European war was unlikely to remain limited given the forming alliances, and there was little remaining unclaimed worthwhile colonial territory. The only remaining option with any prospect of success was the *Hazardspiel*, and this was adopted with the battleship program whose aim was to pressure Britain and lever Germany into the ranks of the first-rate powers. It was almost entirely due to this behind the scenes 'grey eminence' as he was termed that Germany acquired Tsingtao/Qingdao and asserted its interests in China. The acquisition of Samoa was also largely his work.

From the beginning the Navy was applied not only as an instrument of economic policy, but also as a diplomatic tool despite all the tensions of foreign policy this caused. The political function of the Navy is clearly defined in a report by Wilhelm Widenmann, Naval Attaché in London, who wrote in 1907 that Germany's steadily growing naval power posed the greatest hinderance to Britain's freedom of action. This was the basis of the poor relations between the two nations. The fear that in a future war a possibly neutral Germany would reap the prize -naval supremacy-

---

<sup>65</sup> See Peter Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept. Untersuchungen zur Frühphase seiner Aussenpolitik, 1897-1901* (Boppard, 1977), 430f. This is an important work on Bülow's rôle, in which Winzen argues that his conception of world-power was developed independently and later accepted by the Kaiser, contrary to earlier interpretations that there was no single personality controlling foreign policy.

<sup>66</sup> Wehler, 499.

prompted Admiral Fisher to state that the Royal Navy must be of sufficient strength to deal with another power seeking to 'bag the booty'. This was the rationale for the *Dreadnought* program, as Britain did not believe Germany could match it.<sup>67</sup>

Seeking to allay growing fears as to Germany's intentions, the Ambassador to the United States, Graf Bernstorff, stated to a gathering at Philadelphia that Germany's foreign policy was purely commercial. It had 'no territorial ambitions or deep-seated designs against other States and the existing balance of power.'<sup>68</sup> This was just not believed by many in Britain. An influential anti-German group consisting of Sir Eyre Crowe,<sup>69</sup> Sir Francis Bertie (Ambassador in Paris from 1905), Sir Edward Goschen (Ambassador in Berlin from 1908), and Sir Arthur Nicolson (Ambassador in St. Petersburg 1906-1910 and then Permanent Under-Secretary) was to attempt to put some 'backbone' into British policy towards German naval expansion. Crowe believed the Germans were lying on the naval question and noted that 'I regard any such negotiation with so unscrupulous an adversary as highly dangerous.'<sup>70</sup> In fact, naval policy under Tirpitz was far more aggressive in its objectives than was previously supposed. Only the British switch to *Dreadnoughts*, with which Germany could not fully compete for financial reasons, disrupted its plans. Hence the militant change of tone in German policy after 1907.

The nature of the socio-political and economic bases of German foreign policy indicates that this was a nation pushing outward in all directions in a seemingly uncontrolled manner. This instability was compounded by the division of power in the Government. The Kaiser's personal confidence gave Tirpitz an importance surpassing any other Minister, and although he was technically subordinate to the Chancellor, he effectively acted as if he had equal rank. Bülow's foreign policy was captive to naval and armament interests. He as good as stated this himself in 1916: 'For a long time our foreign policy stood to a particular degree in the service of our armaments concerns, it had to operate under abnormal conditions. After the expansion of our navy the normal situation was restored: armament stood in the service of policy'. Similar opinion was expressed by Admiral von Trotha, that there was 'no matter of high policy which was not influenced by the increasing importance of the navy'.<sup>71</sup>

### Walking a fine line

Both naval and military planning were so dominated by technical and mechanistic criteria that when the possibility of war appeared on the horizon, there was no room for political and diplomatic manoeuvre. Tirpitz was aware that his program considerably restricted the Foreign Office's operating space, and created a number of axioms diplomacy had to observe. If foreign policy was subordinated to the

---

<sup>67</sup> BA-MA, RM5/v 1171, Bl. 134, 'Marinepolitisches', Anlage zum Bericht des Marine- Attachees in London vom 14 März 1907'. See also H. Herwig, 'The German Reaction to the Dreadnought Revolution', *International History Review*, XIII, (No. 2, May 1991), 273-283; Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919*, I, *Road to War 1904-1914* (London, 1961). HMS *Dreadnought* was designed for long range gunnery and outclassed all existing warships with a combination of superior speed (21 knots from oil fuelled turbine engines) and firepower (a broadside of ten 12-inch guns).

<sup>68</sup> Reported in the Melbourne *Argus*, 9 November 1909.

<sup>69</sup> Crowe was Senior Clerk in the Foreign Office 1905-1912, and Assistant Under-Secretary from 1912-1915. He had been educated in Germany, and his mother and wife were German. He firmly believed that Germany had the military and economic power to threaten the balance of power and opposed efforts to appease Germany or come to terms with it. His memoranda detail the very thesis put by Fritz Fischer in *The War of Illusions*. See Zara Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977), 183-4.

<sup>70</sup> Crowe's Minute on Goschen to Grey, 10 February 1914, BD, Vol. X, (2), No. 501, 737.

<sup>71</sup> Bülow, *Deutsche Politik* (Berlin, 1917), 120; Trotha, 101.

demands of naval expansion, the first thing excluded was an alliance with Britain. Later, when Germany possessed a powerful fleet the question of a possible alliance would be of a totally different nature, and to Germany's advantage because it could negotiate on the basis of equality.<sup>72</sup> Until then a conflict had to be avoided: 'A war would gain us little, indeed rob us of everything'. The maintenance of peace was the task of diplomacy until the 'danger zone' of naval construction had been passed.<sup>73</sup> A British preventive strike had to be avoided by diplomatic means. This required a discipline in policy which was lacking. Ambassador Paul von Hatzfeldt in London observed in 1899 that German policy toward England had to follow a single axiom, namely 'to remove by agreement the causes of friction in outstanding questions'.<sup>74</sup> Holstein observed that if this were not achieved, Germany 'reduces the security of its peace, worsens its position' and that 'effort and counter effort must be richly balanced, maintaining diplomatic negotiation'.<sup>75</sup>

Bülow colorfully stated that world policy required that Germany 'not appear as Johnny Full-steam-ahead in every street'.<sup>76</sup> But the crucial factor is the reason for this. Bülow made it clear that foreign policy required the avoidance of complications until the Navy was available to be utilised at an appropriate strength.<sup>77</sup> Hohenlohe noted Tirpitz' conclusion that 'all anti-English policy had to cease until we had a fleet which was as strong as the English'.<sup>78</sup> It was precisely here that German foreign policy failed. Not that Tirpitz always followed his own advice. The British Naval Attaché Captain H. D. Watson commented in 1913 that the naval program was 'floated on an orgy of Anglophobia...Tirpitz' policy towards England has been all through an alternation of doses of provocation and soothing syrup'.<sup>79</sup> The essential restraint in German foreign policy and the avoidance of conflict in the period of 'risk' which the Navy needed until it reached its full strength did not eventuate.

Attempts by Bethmann Hollweg, who followed Bülow in 1909, to ease relations also failed primarily because Tirpitz refused to accept any curtailing of the naval program. In addition, Bethmann Hollweg wanted a political as well as a naval agreement with Britain, which the latter would not accept as it impinged on its *entente* with Russia and France. Those directly concerned with colonial negotiations such as Colonial Secretary 1911-18 Wilhelm Solf and Richard von Kühlmann, 1908-1914 councillor in the London embassy, deluded themselves as to British willingness to accept a broad division of spheres of influence.<sup>80</sup>

It was the failure to achieve a naval agreement with Britain and bring Germany out of its isolation, one of Tirpitz' goals for the fleet, that is perhaps his greatest political failure. While he cannot be held solely responsible for the departure from the cautious bases of Bismarckian policy towards Britain with reliance on primarily diplomatic means, he was the strongest exponent of the Kaiser's abrasive 'New Course' which caused so much apprehension across the Channel.<sup>81</sup> The German

<sup>72</sup> On Tirpitz' view of Germany's alliance value see *Memoirs*, I, 124; *Politische Dokumente*, I, 346.

<sup>73</sup> Tirpitz, *Memoirs*, I, 129-130, 141.

<sup>74</sup> N. Rich & M.H. Fisher (Eds), *The Holstein Papers* (Cambridge, 1955-7), IV, 150.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 148, note of 17 November 1899.

<sup>76</sup> Bülow, *Reden*, II, 55.

<sup>77</sup> A. von Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten* (Stuttgart, 1922-3), III, 222, in Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, 411.

<sup>78</sup> Hohenlohe, III, 464.

<sup>79</sup> *British Documents*, X, No.464, Watson-Goschen, 1 March 1913.

<sup>80</sup> BA Koblenz, Nachlaß Solf, 1053/116, Bl.5, Kühlmann-Solf, 6 May 1912; Bl.40, Solf-Kühlmann, 2 July 1913.

<sup>81</sup> See Walther Hubatsch, 'Zur Beurteilung von Tirpitz', *Die Welt als Geschichte*, Heft 3,

leadership operated under a cloud of self-delusion: Graf Schlieffen wrote in 1912 that Britain had as its prime obligation the protection of its world empire and trade, and in this task would come into conflict with Russia and France.<sup>82</sup> This was a view shared by Tirpitz. In this unstable situation, the political leadership hoped to break into the 'world balance system' and speculated on a deep change in given world-political relationships to create the position of a world power for Germany. If Britain did not attack, then the mere preponderance of German naval power would force it to recognise German claims in the world. Bülow parroted a similar tune: the Navy was the tool which was needed 'in order to be able to build up Germany further and farther'.<sup>83</sup>

The politicians capitulated to the armed forces, instead of striving to create a constructive political atmosphere for the settlement of the issues at the heart of the conflict. Bethmann Hollweg protested that it was 'not my business' to comment on strategy, and moreover excused himself in that 'The political leadership was not involved in the creation of the war plans'.<sup>84</sup> As Jehuda Wallach put it in a paraphrase of Clausewitz, the bankruptcy of policy flowed from the bankruptcy of the political leadership.<sup>85</sup> There was a clear stalemate of constructive foreign policy on all sides. By 1914 it had become clear to many in Germany itself that there had been a 'lack of clarity and common views on the direction of *Weltpolitik*...'.<sup>86</sup>

### The flawed concept

If the domestic structure and economy of Wilhelmine Germany created pressures for expansion, the larger structures of global politics were to determine the scope and success or failure of its *Weltpolitik*.<sup>87</sup> German industrial, commercial, and naval expansion did not occur in a vacuum but on a stage where Britain was the dominant player, which would not permit a challenge to its Imperial interests. The belief in the inevitability of German expansion put a clash with Britain onto an almost predetermined path. Wilhelmine policy was tainted by the belief that Germany's progress was in danger for as long as it was dependent on a system primarily determined by Britain, which appeared to block all attempts for world-political influence. There seemed to be only one means to effect a British retraction which would enable Germany to operate freely: the creation of a power instrument which could threaten Britain's position. The Navy served this purpose admirably.

Tirpitz clearly perceived that Germany's position, with the most powerful Continental army backing an ever-expanding navy so close to the heart of the British Empire, provided it with an ideal means to exert pressure and lever concessions. Naval expansion as an instrument of world policy was based on a rigorous power-political calculation. With its assistance those economic and

---

1951, 180, 182.

<sup>82</sup> Bayerische Hauptstaatsarchiv (BHStA), Rep.92 W.von Hahnke, Generalmajor-Ic-BI. Nr. 116/26, letter of 13 December 1912, in Wallach, 203; Tirpitz' similar belief is in Chap. 15 of his *Memoirs*.

<sup>83</sup> Prince von Bülow, *Memoirs* (London, 1921), I, 363.

<sup>84</sup> T. von Bethmann Hollweg, *Betrachtungen zum Weltkrieg* (Berlin:Habbing, 1919-21), I, 167; II, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Jehuda Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht. Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen* (Frankfurt/Main, 1967), 448.

<sup>86</sup> BA Koblenz, Nachlaß Bülow N1016/47, Prof. Otto Hoetzsch, University of Berlin, 'Gedanken über die politischen Ziele des Krieges, December 1914'.

<sup>87</sup> See Klaus Hildebrand, 'Geschichte oder "Gesellschaftsgeschichte"? Die Notwendigkeit einer politischen Geschichtsschreibung von den internationalen Beziehung', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 223 (1976),328-357.

colonial goals, which Germany could never hope to gain by force of arms alone, inevitably had to be achieved.<sup>88</sup> If a strong German battleship fleet forced the British to concentrate in European waters to maintain that superiority essential for the Empire's safety, its unfettered freedom of action detrimental to German interests elsewhere in the world might be so curtailed that it would be forced to make concessions. Any conflict would bring the certainty of a weakening of its world naval power position. Every German ship built increased this risk for Britain: 'Here lies a sure protection for our vital interests...the extension of our war fleet can not be permitted to stop, but must continue proportionately with our requirements'.<sup>89</sup>

However, naval expansion had not produced the results Tirpitz had promised, and during the 1912 negotiations (the 'Haldane Mission') opinion in the German Foreign Office favoured naval limitation in return for colonial agreements, particularly in central Africa.<sup>90</sup> All evidence would indicate that Germany did not want war—at least until the battleship fleet was complete, but was prepared to push Britain to the limit in terms of Holstein's *Hazardspiel* to achieve its goals.

What were the goals of the naval program and *Weltpolitik*, inextricably entwined? Was Germany seeking equality or hegemony? The answer lies in with Germany's hope of forcing entry into the world-system of balance. It speculated on effecting an extensive change to the existing order of world-political conditions, on achieving a position as a world power among others. The risks were high. Such a goal is not defensive (as Tirpitz claimed for the Navy), but offensive. Germany's aims were not specifically territorial, but to achieve a new world-political function for German power thanks to the part the Navy would play in gaining actual equality with other great nations. It was unthinkable that Germany should be satisfied with second place in the Continental and international hierarchy. What this boiled down to was the displacement of Britain from its supremacy which blocked the path for the creation of a world system in which German economic, political, naval, and colonial aspirations could be fulfilled.<sup>91</sup> An it is precisely in this broader context that Australasia -and all British Dominions- would feel German pressure.



A Punch cartoon by John Bernard Partridge depicting the Kaiser's sour point of view on the British-French Entente cordiale of 1904 -John Bull walks off with the trollop France.

<sup>88</sup> Tirpitz, *Politische Dokumente*, p. 422; Hassell, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Erdmann, 18; see also Tirpitz-Bethmann Hollweg, 4 January 1909, *Politische Dokumente*, I, 108.

<sup>90</sup> BA Koblenz, Nachlaß Solf, 1053/115, 1-52, Wilhelm Solf's correspondence with Richard von Kühlmann 1912-14; Cecil, 159f., 169f. The position of Foreign Secretary Gottfried von Jagow was not defined, but Bethmann Hollweg was strongly influenced by the expansionists. Smith, 288, note 83.

<sup>91</sup> See Ludwig Dehio, *Deutschland und die Weltpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert* (München, 1955), 76-88; also Volker Berghahn, *Rüstung und Machtpolitik. Zur Anatomie des "Kalten Krieges" vor 1914* (Düsseldorf, 1973); Max von Hagen, 'Deutsche Weltpolitik und kein Krieg', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd.179 (1955),297-307.

Instead of being distracted by imperial conflicts with France and Russia, Britain moved into formal *entente* with Germany's Continental rivals, notably France in 1904. Moving out of its own isolation, Britain successfully engineered Germany's isolation. The concrete reality was that the decision to build the battleship fleet was *the* decisive mistake of German policy, contributing in large part to the breakdown of Anglo-German relations which also was fuelled by numerous incidents in a climate of increasing antagonism. Ambassador Paul von Hatzfeldt, whom the historian Johannes Willms described as at least one-eyed among the blind, saw the danger and noted that 'the adventurous fleet policy of Herr von Tirpitz will bring us to ruin'.<sup>92</sup> In the hope of pressing Britain out of its position of superiority, Tirpitz attempted to use the method of quantitative armament. Britain reacted not only with increases but counteracted the German concept with *qualitative* improvements. Germany found itself in the ironic position that while its military power was steadily increasing, its security position was being weakened by its naval program. The only way out of this dilemma was to revise the armament program and to break off the race. But as Volker Berghahn makes clear, such a reversal was no longer possible without endangering the entire political structure.<sup>93</sup> After the premise of the stability of existing alliances and British isolation upon which German naval expansion was based changed from 1904, the entire naval and world-political plan began to crumble and placed Germany in an increasingly difficult situation. Tirpitz and Bülow nevertheless believed in the possibility of breaking through the obstacles to achieving world power status. In reality, as William McNeill succinctly put it, 'The irrationality of rational, professionalized planning could not have been made more patently manifest...the uncanny, sonambulant lockstep with which the major Powers marched to war...'<sup>94</sup>

For Max Weber

It was not German economic competition which was the decisive ground for going to war...but the perceived threat of our fleet...to have to concentrate the English fleet in the North Sea...meant a reduction in world-political freedom...and forced reductions in other areas which England had never yet had to make.<sup>95</sup>

### Future planning

For Germany to survive as a world power, the connections between it and Africa, the Asian-Pacific region, and South America had to be secured. This could be achieved only by a strong Navy, but this was a *future* task as far as Tirpitz was concerned. The maintenance of naval strength was needed for the next step after German hegemony on the Continent had been achieved.

---

<sup>92</sup> J. Willms, *Nationalismus ohne Nation. Deutsche Geschichte von 1789 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Claasen, 1983), 656.

<sup>93</sup> Volker Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-plan - Genesis Und Verfall Einer Innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie Unter Wilhelm II* (Düsseldorf, 1971), 601; 'Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus unter Wilhelm II', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd.210, February 1970, 96f.

<sup>94</sup> William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power. Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D.1000* (Oxford, 1983), 306.

<sup>95</sup> Max Weber, 'Deutschland unter den europäischen Weltmächten' (1916), *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, 165.



In 1916 at Bethmann Hollweg's request Chief of the Admiralty Staff **Henning von Holtzendorff** drafted the Navy's first comprehensive war aims program, which emphasised the acquisition of colonial territory of economic significance and adjacent to strategic sealanes.<sup>96</sup> While these plans were somewhat *ad hoc* because the War came some five years before it was estimated the Navy would be ready for its world-political function, the effect was to nullify any chance for an end to the War. Such demands formulated in terms of *Weltpolitik* guaranteed the impossibility of a negotiated peace, as they were simply unacceptable to Britain, something Bethmann Hollweg could not grasp.<sup>97</sup>

For Pan-German and imperialist elements, any colonial redivision at the end of the War was considered temporary: 'Without a fleet, no colonies...without colonies no fleet'. Even if Germany were to consolidate its European position, but lose its colonial possessions, it had lost the War in the wider world: 'A Germany restricted to central Europe would cease to be a world power...and remain dependent on other nations. The path of English-American world domination would be set'. Germany's position in relation to Britain and France was the alpha and omega of the War. It could not cease to fight until it had achieved an undeniable victory which did not mean Britain's destruction, but would force it to concede Germany free access to, and freedom of action in the world.<sup>98</sup> In this can be seen the culmination of German policy since 1897.



<sup>96</sup> PA-AA Bonn, 'Der Weltkrieg', Nr.15, Bd.2, Bl.44, Holtzendorff-Bethmann Hollweg, 26 November 1916.

<sup>97</sup> Konrad Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven/London, 1973), 112f., 270f.; Bethmann Hollweg, I, 43f.; II, 1f.

<sup>98</sup> Direktor Fr. Hupfeld, 'Das deutsche Kolonialreich der Zukunft', *Meereskunde. Sammlung volkstümlicher Vorträge zum Verständnis der nationalen Bedeutung von Meer und Seewesen*, II Jg, 2. Heft, 1917, 3, 8-10.