



5 Did Australia face an existential threat in 1914? German war planning and the realities of Australia's position.

‘ Operations against Australian coastal cities at the current level of coastal defence are certainly so attractive, that fast surprise attacks on them...are not excluded.’¹

Perhaps the greatest failing of some historians writing on the theme leading up to and following the anniversaries of World War 1 is to reject or trivialise the concept of an existential threat faced by a geographically isolated Australia on the eve of conflict. That this is denied by some Australian historians despite the overwhelming archival evidence highlights the importance of the ongoing debate.² Rather, the idea is presented that Australia reflected a narrow, pro-British mindset resulting from cultural isolation, and that participation in the War was an automatic imperialistic reflex action explained by residual cultural cringe. On the contrary, from their time studying at German universities a number of Australia's eminent political figures had an understanding of the Prusso-German political mind and a clear view of exactly what Germany's power aims were and the implications for Australia -and for all the Dominions- if the existing balance were overturned by a German victory in any conflict with Britain.

It is first necessary to define the threat. It was not one of ‘conquer and occupy’ as some deniers of threat hyperbolically put it, but rather economic and strategic, which affected Australia's function as a key supplier of raw materials to Britain. The German documents expressly state that the merchant trade of Britain, its Empire and allies would be a prime wartime target. There was absolutely no doubt in the minds of German planners that an attack on Australasian, Canadian and American merchant shipping and port facilities was both feasible and essential. In tandem with attacks against Australasian trade and troop transports through Suez, and operations in North and South American waters, the aim was to disrupt the British economy by the interdiction of raw materials and foodstuffs, and cause economic pressure and social unrest which would force the British Government to negotiate on terms acceptable to Germany.³ Thus German activity in the Asia-Pacific region is placed in a world-political context of significance.

This is clear from the German documents which present undeniable evidence and which too often has been conveniently ignored or brushed aside because they contradict the desired anti-imperialist paradigm. The later British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour commented wryly in 1899 that whenever there was trouble in some part of the world, the Germans would sit down

¹ BA-MA (German Federal Military Archive, Freiburg), RM5/v 5702, Bl. 199, Oberleutnant z.S. Wieting, ‘Organisation des Commonwealth of Australia und seine Bedeutung für die politischen und wirtschaftlichen Verhältnisse in der Südsee’, April 1902.

² The issue has continued for two decades, initially starting with Gerhard Fischer's ‘Negative integration’ and an Australian road to modernity: interpreting the Australian homefront experience in World War 1’, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 26, 104 (April 1995), 452-476. More realistic are the essays in John Moses and Christopher Pugsley, eds, *The German Empire and Britain's Pacific Dominions 1871-Essays on the Role of Australia and New Zealand in World Politics in the Age of Imperialism* (Claremont Calif., Regina Books, 2000).

³ BA-MA, RM47/v 525, Admiralty report of 9 November 1914.

and work out an action plan to take advantage of it.⁴ It is this predilection for order and preparedness in the form of records and numerous drafts and revisions that provides a comprehensive picture of the intent and extent of cruiser/commerce warfare operations. The minutely detailed yearly preparation of operational plans according to the changing international situation and tensions that waxed and waned among the Powers provides a clear insight into German intentions and methods to interdict trade and communications between Britain and its Dominions with the aim of forcing Britain to negotiate a European peace and redivision of world spheres of influence on German terms. In the Dominions, the exercise of German naval power was acknowledged as the most likely threat. The navy was seen not only as an instrument in support of overseas economic expansion, but also as a tool of diplomacy and strategy in German aspirations to world power and eventually to supplant British hegemony.⁵ Australia was considered a vital link in the chain of supply of essential resources for the British war effort and so had to be neutralised. What so many Australasian historians fail to grasp is the ideological imperative of Wilhelmine Germany.⁶ In the words of Gustav Schmoller, professor of political science at Berlin, We wish to expand our trade and industry so that we can...oppose the extended robber-mercantilism of the three world powers which excludes all other states and seeks to destroy their trade. It is only to achieve this modest goal that a large fleet is necessary.⁷



Germany had to strengthen itself so that it could match, even supplant, the British world-empire. An this could most easily be achieved by challenging Britain's naval supremacy. Already in 1898 (later Field Marshal) Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz wrote in *Das Volk in Waffen (The Nation under Arms)* that naval power guaranteed greater strength for a nation, even when its navy was not in a position to influence land operations directly. He used the striking example of the American Navy in the Spanish-American War to show how crushing victories could win valuable prizes for the nation's useful strategic and economic colonial possessions. Between relatively equal opponents, final victory would go to the one which could maintain control of the seas. Germany, too, had to be in a position to determine such an outcome.⁸ It is in this crucial underlying sentiment that one of the basic imperatives of German expansion is to be found. Britain's 'world domination' had to be challenged in order for Germany to thrive:

⁴ H. Herwig & D. Trask, 'Naval Operations Plans between Germany and the United States of America 1898-1913', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, Heft 2, 1970, 9.

⁵ Willi Boelcke, 'Die Marine als Werkzeug preußisch-deutscher Außen- und wirtschaftspolitik', *Marine-Rundschau*, Bd.78, 10, 1981, 558. On the transition from world- to great-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.

⁶ See the chapters on the underpinnings of Germany's 'world mission' in J. Moses & P. Overlack, *First know your enemy. Comprehending Imperial German war aims & deciphering the enigma of Kultur*, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2019).

⁷ G. Schmoller, 'Die wirtschaftliche Zukunft Deutschlands und die Flottenvorlage', in G. Schmoller, M. Sering, A. Wagner, eds., *Handels- und Machtpolitik. Reden und Aufsätze im Auftrage der Freien Vereinigung für Flottenvorträge*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1900, I, 33.

⁸ Jehuda Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht. Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen*, Bernard & Graefe, Frankfurt/Main, 1967, 227.

The war, which can follow from this conflict situation, and how many believe must follow, has for us the...goal of breaking England's world domination, and thereby the freeing of necessary colonial possessions for the necessary expansion of European states.⁹

Many believed that it was economic rivalry which would bring the inevitable confrontation. For Schmoller, international rivalries were economic ones which impinged on national sovereignty in a climate where mercantilism increasingly prevailed. With its imperialism, Britain was aiming to create from its scattered possessions an enormous, self-sufficient world empire closed to economic rivals. It was the infusion of the naval idea into existing policy which gave the latter a new and aggressive dimension, and transformed it into 'world policy' (*Weltpolitik*). The old Eurocentric vision was replaced by a new creed in which the Navy was an instrument of the growing economic interests that were pushing Germany out into the world, and this would inevitably result in a clash with Britain- and consequently also its Dominions.¹⁰



With the focus on the battleship program under the State Secretary of the Navy Office (*Reichs-Marineamt*) Alfred von Tirpitz, it has been often overlooked that in his early career, he had the opportunity to travel widely, including to South America and, finally in 1896, as Chief of the then East Asian Cruiser Division. It was the latter which gave him first-hand experience of Anglo-German economic rivalry in a rapidly expanding market which influenced his subsequent views.¹¹ Historical thought played a large part in his thinking. The legacy of Leopold von Ranke, political realism and deification of the state in Heinrich von Treitschke, with whom Tirpitz had a close personal relationship, merged with and reinforced the Social-Darwinist basis of navalism espoused by the American Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose writing Tirpitz had translated and distributed by the Navy Office.¹²

The editor of the influential *Preußische Jahrbücher*, Hans Delbrück, wrote in 1912 that it was an obvious truth that the German Navy was the clear instrument of a divinely ordained cultural mission: a stage had been reached where German economic development and

⁹ Walther Görlitz, ed., *Der Kaiser...Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Marinekabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller über die Ära Wilhelms II*, Göttingen, Musterschmidt, 1965, 37. A long term flow of events and perspectives is provided by Wolfgang Mommsen, *Großmachtstellung und Weltpolitik. Die Außenpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1870-1914*, Ullstein Verlag, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, 1993.

¹⁰ Volker Berghahn, 'Flottenrüstung und Machtgefüge', in Michael Stürmer (Ed.) *Das kaiserliche Deutschland. Politik und Gesellschaft 1870-1918*, Droste, Düsseldorf 1970, 381; see also R. J. S. Hoffmann, *Great Britain and the German Trade Rivalry 1875-1914*, Russell, New York, 1964.

¹¹ See Adolf von Trotha, *Großadmiral von Tirpitz. Flottenbau und Reichsgedanke*, Korn, Breslau, 1934), 51f. ; Ulrich von Hassell, *Tirpitz. Sein Leben und Wirken mit Berücksichtigung seiner Beziehungen zu Albrecht von Stosch*, Chr. Belsersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart, 1920, 119-120.

¹² Tirpitz' neo-Rankean world-view is discussed in Hans-Heinz Krill, *Die Ranke-Renaissance-Max Lenz und Erich Marcks* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1962), 196f. On Mahan's influence see R.H. Beadon, 'The Sea Power of Germany and the Teaching of Mahan', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, 68, 1923, 500-7. Influential to an understanding the link has been J. S. Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: the Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan reconsidered*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 1998. More recently see Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial Germany Navy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2011; Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game. Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009 examines the political-cultural aspects. A broader sweep is presented in Dirk Bönker, *Militarism in a Global Age. Naval ambitions in Germany and the United States before World War 1* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2012).

inherent cultural values compelled it to aim higher, to 'give us that share of the control of the world which is due to nations with high cultures by virtue of their character and the fact that they are destined for greater things'.¹³ It was the infusion of the naval idea into existing policy which created a new and aggressive dimension manifested in *Weltpolitik*, and which was to be directly relevant for Australia by 1914. The German historian Peter Winzen clearly presented the alternatives with which foreign policy gambled: either international decline or the opportunity to expand Germany's world-power position.¹⁴

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'. Contemporary Germans understood the term to refer 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. Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow provided a smooth rationale in his *Imperial Germany* published in English in 1914.¹⁵ 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 consolidating its position in Asia and the Pacific. This throws not only considerable light on Germany's intentions to become a world power generally but provides valuable insight into its assessment of the wartime value of the resource rich self-governing British Dominions. 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 a trade war, or were there deeper issues about which Australasian politicians, the press, and the educated public were keenly aware?

Given that Australia was of interest to Germany as evidenced in the mass of naval planning records still extant but scarcely researched, how was detailed information obtained? It was necessary to know the level of naval and military support the Dominions could offer Britain. The reports of the German Naval War Intelligence Service (*Marine-Kriegsnachrichtenwesen*) operatives in Australia cover a wide range of economic, strategic and political topics. Consuls and leading German businessmen were closely involved. When put together over a period of time all this provided a clear enough picture of Australia's defence capability. The new Commonwealth was doubly concerned, first with British concentration in the North Sea and secondly with the effective implementation of cruiser warfare plans against Anglo-Australasian commerce and communications in the Asian-Pacific region in tandem with similar plans against the South American Atlantic trade routes. There were numerous reports on the progress towards an Australian Fleet and the internal political debate which could affect this. Consul-General Paul von Buri commented in October 1901 about the suggestions by Rear-Admiral Sir Lewis Beaumont for improved naval defence (a squadron of fast cruisers) and acting Foreign Minister Oswald von Richthofen forwarded this to both Naval Secretary Alfred von Tirpitz and Chief of Admiralty Staff Otto von Diederichs.¹⁶ The information had clear practical implications for proposed German naval action in the Asia Pacific region.

How did the Germans assess Australia's rôle in the broader naval situation? By 1909 it had become clear to the British that without the effective participation of the Dominions it would be

¹³ Hans Delbrück, 'Deutsche Ängstlichkeit', *Preußische Jahrbücher*, Bd. 149, August 1912, 362-3.

¹⁴ Peter Winzen, 'Der Krieg in Bülows Kalkül: Katastrophe der Diplomatie oder Chance zur Machtexpansion?', in J. Düllfer & K. Holl, eds., *Bereit zum Krieg. Kriegsmoralität im Wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890-1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 161-193.

¹⁵ Prince Bülow, *Imperial Germany*, (London/New York: Cassell), 1914.

¹⁶ Bundesarchiv- Militärarchiv (German Federal Military Archive) Freiburg, (henceforth BAMA), RM 5/v 5792, encl. Richthofen-Tirpitz, Diederichs. Also included were copies of 'The Military Forces of Australasia'; 'Report on the Military Forces of the Colony of New South Wales, 1899'; 'Report of the Council of Defence (Victoria), 1900'; 'Report on the Defence Forces of New Zealand, 1900'; 'Report on the Queensland Military Forces, 1900'; 'Report on the Marine Defence Force, 1899-1900.' (Queensland)".

impossible to maintain the 'Two-Power Standard'.¹⁷ Australia's possible contribution to a conflict had real implications. Germany took Australia's participation in any war very seriously - hence the foresight of the many years of observation and information gathering that preceded it. Some of the most far-ranging operational plans were composed in the period 1902-1910 when, as Holger Herwig says, there was 'a return to Admiral von Tirpitz' *Stützpunktpolitik* - the policy of acquiring a system of naval bases circling the globe - which...found its most distinct expression in the work of Vice-Admiral Wilhelm Büchsel.¹⁸ It is where German acquisitions in the Near and Far East fit into this 'globe-encircling' system that needs to be considered. Germany felt the lack of bases which would enable it to operate on the world scale that the Royal Navy could, and only in this way could *Weltpolitik* be implemented. Strategic points were sought wherever they might enable pressure to be exerted on the British Empire from Constantinople to Tsingtau (Qingdao).¹⁹ Ernst Jäckh, confidant of Foreign Secretary Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, wrote in 1913 that 'Baghdad and the railway can threaten England at its most vulnerable point, on the Indian and Egyptian borders...'²⁰ Kiderlen was described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'an original member of the notorious *Camarilla* which for several years composed the inner circle of Court favourites'.²¹ With German influence and military-naval power operating in tandem from east and west, the richest part of the British Empire would be caught in a vice.

From an Australian perspective, there was a kind of domino-theory in operation. If any crucial part of the Empire were threatened, how safe would Australia be? And the threat was real. In 1905 the head of the Naval Cabinet, Admiral Georg von Müller, asked Tirpitz rhetorically what should be done if Germany's naval armaments policy led to a war with Britain. The answer: 'I feel we ought to be clear about this question even before it is asked...a world war which will lead our armies into India and Egypt.'²² Joseph Cook in a prophetic review of Australia's strategic position in 1911 referred to the implications for the nation moving to the forefront of concerns due to the deterioration of Anglo-German relations with the increasing possibility of Australian involvement in a European war.²³

Germany's war aims included clear intentions of expanding its foreign bases with the view to consolidating its post-war world-power position. Even if Tirpitz' pre-war *Stützpunktpolitik* (overseas bases policy) was modest due to the cost of the battleship program, the naval leadership formulated extensive war aims between 1914-6 which were intended as 'a *minimum* requirement which would make possible the Reich's future leap to an actual world power position.'²⁴ Colonial questions were not a large part of war aims as specifically

¹⁷ On the Two-Power Standard see A. J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1914*, Vol.1 *The Road to War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1970, 123-5. The Admiralty study is RM5/v 1160, Kapitänleutnant Rehder, "Die Entwicklung der englischen Colonialmarinen. Augenblicklicher Stand der Frage und Betrachtungen über die Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten, sowie über die Beteiligung der Colonialflotten in einem deutsch-englischen Krieg", June 1914.

¹⁸ Holger Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1941* (Oxford: Little, Brown, 1976), 61-62.

¹⁹ The importance of Constantinople was that from here a Power 'would exercise its pressure on Egypt and indirectly on India.' *Deutsche Volkswirtschaftliche Correspondenz*, Nr.81, 8 Oktober 1912, in Klaus Wernecke, *Der Wille zur Weltgeltung* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1970), 289.

²⁰ *Deutschland im Orient nach dem Balkankrieg* (Berlin, 1913), p. 14, in Wernecke, 292. Jäckh was editor of the *Neckar-Zeitung* and had a close relationship with Bülow.

²¹ C. Smythe, 'German Statesmen of the Hour', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September, 1911.

²² Müller-Tirpitz, 8 February 1905, cited in Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, (London: Macmillan, 1973), 53.

²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1911.

²⁴ H. Herwig, 'Verfehlte Weltpolitik: Drei Aspekte deutsch-amerikanischer Beziehungen 1888-1941', in J. Hütter, R. Meyers, D. Papenfuss, Hrsg., *Tradition und Neubeginn. Internationale Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, (Köln: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1975), 55, based on BA-MA, Nachlaß Vanselow, F 7612, 'Kriegsziele der Marine', Holtzendorff's memorandum of 26 November 1916, in Holger Herwig, 'Admirals versus Generals: The War Aims of the Imperial German Navy, 1914-1918', *Central*

formulated, mainly because it was assumed that these would be realised in the re-division that would occur after a German victory. The value of British possessions such as Burma, Ceylon, Malaya and Hong Kong to Germany was well recognised. Chief of Admiralty Staff Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff wanted major sea lanes controlled and used as steps to the central African colonial empire (*Mittelafrika*) which would be established. The importance of *Mittelafrika* as a part of overseas-Germany stretching from the East African coast to East Asia, and the control of the Indian Ocean it was hoped it would bring, thus cutting Australia's connections, must be kept in mind.²⁵ New Guinea with its cobalt and nickel deposits would increase in importance. Further into the Pacific, possession of Tahiti would provide control of American trade between the Panama Canal and the Far East in any future conflict.²⁶

It is generally accepted that Tirpitz did not want war in 1914 because the battle fleet was incomplete and the War was to secure Continental hegemony, not the *Weltherrschaft* (world hegemony) in whose achievement the Navy was to have the leading part.²⁷ This was to be the next step. It saw an opportunity to obtain those naval bases around the world which were essential for future expansion after the Continent and *Mitteleuropa* had been secured. One memorandum pointed out that Germany would need to control the entire Indian Ocean coast of Africa to hold the British in the Suez and Red Sea areas. With ally Turkey dominant in Arabia, Germany could control the eastern trade routes.²⁸ Following a German victory, not only would Britain have been defeated militarily, but its economic survival – and that of the Dominions- would have been completely dependent on German goodwill. It is within this larger picture of overall intentions that the function of proposed commerce warfare in general, and in particular the task of the East Asian Cruiser Squadron ranging over the vast expanses of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, receive their real significance. German naval policy overseas as distinct from the North Sea was clearly an essential piece on the chess board struggle for hegemony.

European History, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Sept., 1972), 215-6.

²⁵ In early 1914 intensive negotiations involving the ambassadors in London and Lisbon, the Colonial Office, the Warburg and Deutsche Banks, resulted in a German-Portuguese agreement for the acquisition of more than half of the then territory of the Portuguese Nyassa Company, which would create a core for *Mittelafrika*. Wernecke, 296-8.

²⁶ Holtzendorff, Denkschrift, op.cit.

²⁷ Emphasis on battleship construction did not mean that the Navy's overseas function was rejected, rather it was a practical recognition of immediate needs and the limited resources available. The battleship fleet represented the first step in the development of a world-fleet once the European situation had been 'stabilised' – that is by a successful negation of British hegemony- to Germany's advantage.

²⁸ BA-MA Nachlaß Levetzow, N239/19, Bd. 2, Denkschrift Trotha, 'Aufgaben der Marine nach dem Kriege', 1 July 1917.