

THE NAVAL
ROUTE TO THE
ABYSS

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THE NAVAL ROUTE TO THE ABYSS

The Anglo-German Naval Race 1895–1914

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This volume is dedicated to Roderick Suddaby (1946–2013),
Keeper of the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum,
a great help to all historians and a long-time friend of the Navy Records
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NOTES ON GERMAN SOURCES

Editorial Practice

The German documents in this publication are – with very few exceptions – presented in their original form, omitting later corrections and marginal notes. In many instances the English translation is only for an extract whereas the German text – again with very few exceptions – is reproduced at full length. Emphasis within the text is printed in italics. Smaller type sizes have been used in order to adapt the information provided to tabular size or to follow the pattern of the original or to indicate headings that are positioned in the margin in the original.

Titles and Ranks Cited in German as well as in English

a) Titles of government office holders:

Fürst	– Prince
Graf	– Count
Reichskanzler	– Chancellor
Staatssekretär	– State Secretary / Secretary of State

b) Official titles of civil servants serving in the Imperial Navy Office:

Geheimrat	– Privy Councillor
Geheimer Oberbaurat	– Senior Privy Construction Councillor
Marinebaurat	– Naval Construction Councillor
Marineoberbaurat	– Senior Naval Construction Councillor

c) British and German naval ranks occurring in this volume:

Großadmiral (Grand Admiral)	– Admiral of the Fleet
Admiral	– Admiral
Vizeadmiral	– Vice Admiral

Kontreadmiral (Konteradmiral)	– Rear Admiral
Kapitän zur See	– Captain
Fregattenkapitän	– Commander
Korvettenkapitän	– Lieutenant Commander
Kapitänleutnant	– Lieutenant
Oberleutnant zur See/Leutnant zur See	– Sub-Lieutenant

Displacement Tonnage

Usually, British and German displacement figures are based on a different measurement as the German metric ton does not exactly match the British ton (=1.016kg). Yet, at least the reference works Roger Chesneau and Eugène M. Kolésnik (eds), *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1860–1905* (London 1979), and Robert Gardiner and Randal Gray (eds), *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1906–1921* (London 1985), apparently provide figures for both navies based on the same measurement.

In order to allow for a somewhat easier comparison the editorial notes concerning the displacement of German ships are taken from these reference works. Where figures for full load and normal displacements are given (from 1905 onwards) the latter figure is cited.

Branches of the Imperial Navy Office

In this volume the Imperial Navy Office with several of its branches is quoted by the organisational abbreviated designation in accordance with the usage observed in the sources:

- A General Navy Department [Allgemeines Marinedepartement], to which the Military Division (A I) [Militärische Abteilung] was subordinated,
- B Engineering Department [Technisches Departement], from 1905 onwards designated as Yard Department [Werft-Departement],
- C Administrations Department [Verwaltungs-Departement],
- E Budget Division (from 1905 till 1914 subordinate to the Administrations Department (E or CE) [Etats-Abteilung], from 1914 onwards Budget Department [Etats-Departement],
- H Nautical Division [Nautische Abteilung], from 1908 onwards Nautical Department [Nautisches Departement],
- K Drawing Division [Konstruktionsabteilung], from 1905 onwards Drawing Department [Konstruktions-Departement],
- M Central Department [Zentralabteilung],

- N News Bureau [Nachrichtenbüro],
W Weapons Division [Waffenabteilung], from 1906 onwards
Weapons Department [Waffen-Departement].

The biographical information concerning German naval officers usually draws on Hans H. Hildebrand and Ernest Henriot (eds), *Deutschlands Admirale 1849–1945*, 3 vols (Osnabrück, 1988–90).

INTRODUCTION

Rationale for the Volume

The Anglo-German naval race, as its name implies, had two participants, both of whom were equally important to the events that unfolded. Despite this, many of the accounts of this, probably the most totemic of all modern armaments competitions prior to the Cold War, analyse it largely from the viewpoint of one or other of its principal actors. Rarely, in such studies, are both contestants the equal focus of attention.

There are, to be sure, many good reasons for this tendency. Without doubt, the naval policies of Britain and Germany were both significant undertakings in their own right, worthy of detailed individual scrutiny and capable, within their exclusive national contexts, of revealing much about the political progress taking place in their particular settings. Indeed, that the growth of the German navy can best be understood not as a military or foreign policy tool, but rather in a domestic setting, as a policy response to the difficulties faced by the autocratic German political elite to the demands for greater political pluralism on the part of the wider population has long been a mainstay of the 'Kehrite' school of German history, a point that will be elaborated later in this introduction. In this context, giving equality of focus to Britain, the other player in the naval race, would make little sense.

In addition to the strong pull of such domestic contexts, it is also true that many of the leading players in the saga of the naval race were colourful characters that merit serious and close personal study on their own terms without the encumbrance that comes from intruding a wider international context. That one might examine the life and policy judgements of a Fisher or a Churchill without equal reference to their German counterparts is not, in this sense, a matter of great surprise. Equally, that a historian might chose to write about Tirpitz or Kaiser Wilhelm II without conterminously putting the British dimension on display in terms of absolute equality is clearly not an invalid approach.

If existing studies of the Anglo-German naval race thus tend to be studies of British naval policy or of German naval policy, or alternatively biographical evaluations of Fisher or of Tirpitz, this is entirely

understandable and justifiable. Nevertheless, this is an approach that this volume intends to abjure. The naval race that will be illuminated through documentary evidence here will be both a British one and a German one. Placed side by side with each other in chronologically organised chapters will be a selection of primary sources from both participants that allow a direct comparison to be drawn between them. This will illustrate not only what Britain and Germany intended to achieve in their management of naval affairs, but also how they regarded each other and the extent to which their policies were reactive responses to what their potential adversary was doing. The documents will cover a wide range of issues. At the top level will be documents revealing the grand strategy, insofar as there was one, pursued by the two naval powers. This will be particularly relevant to Germany given the influence that the so-called ‘Tirpitz Plan’ had on the long-term unfolding of German naval shipbuilding and fleet formation. The fact that the Tirpitz Plan was underpinned by a strategic concept – the *Risikoflotte* idea (of which more will be said later) – and had a broad aim of supporting the Reich government’s wider policy agenda gives added weight to this. Underneath this level, are numerous documents explaining the conception of future war that existed in the upper echelons of the British and German navies. These documents are surprisingly diverse. Naturally, the two sides planned for a fleet engagement and each thought long and hard about the circumstances most propitious for bringing this about in the manner most favourable for themselves. They also considered economic warfare in both its offensive and defensive forms. Ways of undermining the opponent’s economy as well as protecting one’s own commercial interests were frequently discussed, with signs of development evident across time. Tactical matters also frequently appear in the documentation. The capabilities of the prospective enemy, evaluations of different weapons systems, considerations of different types of deployment, and berthing and basing arrangements were all matters of concern and reveal much about the dynamic that kept the naval race active.

The British Sources

The documents are drawn from a wide range of places. In the case of Britain, the Admiralty papers at the National Archives are the main source of records on naval policy. As has frequently been observed, these are not an easy set of papers to use. There are two main reasons for this: the manner in which they are organised and the fact that a very large number of them were destroyed a long time ago. A discussion of these points will help set the matter in context.

In the pre-First World War era the Admiralty was divided for administrative purposes into different divisions, departments and branches, each of which was responsible for the management of its own records in its own registries. Many of these branches (which, rather unhelpfully, changed their names from time to time in the various reorganisations so beloved of ministers and civil servants) dealt with matters that did not directly bear upon the naval race. Not much of the business of the Victualling Branch or the Medical Director General's Department, for example, was focused on naval arms competition between the two leading European maritime states. This is probably just as well because one of the consequences of the devolved branch registry system was that the branches themselves decided, within certainly loosely determined bounds, what to do with their own records once they were finished with them. This encompassed which of their papers to destroy and which to send to the central Admiralty Record Office for more prolonged retention. Very few of the branches outside of the Admiralty Secretary's Department saw much purpose in the long-term preservation of their papers. The result of this was that, with the notable exception of those few papers originating in these outlying branches that were sent to the Admiralty for a decision – and, hence, made executive – very few of their records now survive. For naval historians in general this is a tragedy. For historians of the naval race it is potentially less of a problem, as the main source of papers relating to this topic originated in Military Branch ('M Branch' for short). As this was one of the branches of the Secretary's Department, most of its papers did go to the Admiralty Record Office when the branch had finished with them. Unfortunately, for reasons that will be explained below, that did not necessarily ensure their survival to this day.

The Admiralty Record Office, not being blessed with limitless space, did not keep all of the records that were sent to it. Instead, it selectively 'weeded' the documents in its possession to reduce their number and make the whole more manageable. The process was undertaken in stages. Fifteen years after their receipt, the documents in the Record Office were examined. At this stage all routine papers were destroyed. These routine papers, it should be said, constituted no less than 93 per cent of the total. The residue from this cull (7 per cent of the original total) was then re-examined twenty-five years later, when it was further whittled down to a mere 2 per cent of the original total. The theory behind this rather savage selection process was that all documents of temporary need and transient value would be destroyed. However, anything with long-term political, financial, administrative, legal or historical significance would be retained permanently. The reality, of course, did not live up to this promise. As was probably inevitable with any system that kept a mere 2 per cent of

the original files, numerous documents of considerable importance were destroyed by this weeding process. The Record Office digest, in which – theoretically, at least – were listed all the papers that were sent to the Record Office, is filled with entries for files of enormous historical significance on all aspects of the naval race that no longer exist due to overzealous weeding. The selection of British Admiralty documents for this volume is, therefore, partly (and adversely) shaped by the seemingly arbitrary decisions taken by the Record Office clerks between 1958 and 1961 when they undertook the final ‘weeding’ of the pre-1914 papers in their care.

If M Branch was the main source of papers on the strategic deployment of the navy, the originator of many British appreciations of the German navy was the Naval Intelligence Department. Unfortunately, this was one of those departments that rarely deposited its papers in the central Admiralty Record Office. The result is that not only are the Royal Navy’s assessments of the German fleet harder to find than might have been anticipated or desired, but there are not even full lists of the missing papers in the Admiralty digest because they were never sent there in the first place. Even guessing what has been lost is, thus, hard in this instance.

Some of the deficiencies in the Admiralty papers can be made up in other ways. One of these is to look at the records of other government departments. Naturally enough, the Admiralty engaged in correspondence with those other branches of government that operated in the spheres of foreign and defence policy. Crucial letters and memoranda missing from the Admiralty’s own records can be found in the papers of the Foreign Office (FO), Committee of Imperial Defence (CAB), and the Secret Service (HD). An additional official source of naval papers is the Admiralty Library. One of the oldest of the great libraries of state, its collection contains record copies of some of the printed Admiralty books and pamphlets that were distributed for information to the fleet. In the pre-First World War era, many of these had a considerable bearing on the naval race. So, too, do the records of the Admiralty Controller’s Department. While most of the regular files of this department have long been lost, those files that specifically related to the design and construction of particular warships were bound together in so-called ‘Ships’ Covers’. Within these volumes are sometimes to be found the intelligence appreciations or tactical requirements that led to a particular design being adopted. During the naval race, German intentions and capabilities were key factors and so the Ships’ Covers can provide vital information on these points.

In addition to such official sources outside of the main Admiralty records, private papers can also provide considerable insights into the

gaps within the main primary source base. Numerous politicians and naval officers kept up a vigorous private correspondence or retained copies of state papers sent to them. These are frequently essential augmentations to the main records, but even more frequently they tell a tale that would otherwise be entirely unknown. To this end, documents have been included here from the private papers located in London, Oxford, Cambridge and Portsmouth.

A final source of crucial information is the writing of the American naval historian Arthur J. Marder. By a mixture of luck and perseverance, Marder managed to persuade the Admiralty to allow him access to their closed records in both 1938 and 1956.¹ Marder's two visits to the Record Office were providential. It was not simply that he saw documents that would not become available to other historians for several years, though, of course, this did happen; rather, the crucial point is that he saw documents that were later destroyed in the weeding process.² His tantalising use of quotations from these documents – all of which were vital papers that should never have been pulped – is the only reason that we know anything at all about the actual texts of these records.

The piecing together of this jigsaw of sources allows a systematic, if frustratingly incomplete, picture of British naval policy to be produced. The chapters on the Royal Navy that are included here provide just that. They chart the growing awareness of the German naval challenge in all its various forms, the internal debate over how serious this was, and the development of different policies for dealing with it.

The German Sources

Set alongside these British chapters are chapters on the German navy covering exactly the same period. The story of the German naval records is different to the British experience, but is no less intriguing. In this case,

¹The story is ably recounted in Barry M. Gough, *Historical Dreadnoughts: Arthur Marder, Stephen Roskill and Battles for Naval History* (Barnsley, 2010).

²It has recently become fashionable in certain circles to denigrate Marder's important and pioneering work by implying that he saw fewer primary documents than was once believed – the object presumably being to contest his mastery of the archival sources and thereby to cast doubt upon his interpretations. In the absence of a definitive list of what he was shown in the Admiralty Record Office, it is difficult to calculate the precise extent of his researches there. However, there are ways of producing a reasonable estimate. For example, many surviving Admiralty dockets still contain the Record Office vouchers from 1938 and/or 1956 indicating that they were once issued to Marder; hence we can be sure that a considerable number of dockets now in ADM 1 were used by him during his visits. Equally, we also know from his quotations from documents that are now sadly missing that he also saw many important files that no longer exist. Collectively, this proves that he was provided with a not inconsiderable number of original dockets, a fact that renders attempts to minimize his research as at best unwarranted and misplaced.

war-time accident was a major factor in bequeathing to us the records we have today.

The Imperial Navy certainly lost the arms race (and the subsequent war, defeat in which eventually initiated the overthrow of the existing order), but it did not lose its files. As early as 1912, facing political bankruptcy of his plan, Tirpitz had started collecting documents for his own autobiography. In 1916, the Imperial Navy Office decided to write its history of the naval war at sea. Following this decision, officers began collecting all documents relating to the navy's policy during the war as well as naval operations. However, the volume dealing with the pre-war era was never written, for it seemed more urgent to defend the navy's actions during the war and thus make clear that it had at least tried to contribute successfully to Germany's war effort. Instead, it was Tirpitz himself who, for many years, influenced the debate on Germany's naval policy before 1914. In the autumn of 1919 he published his *Memoirs* in both German and English versions. These *Memoirs*, which were presented to the public in Germany and in Britain on the very same day, not only contained his 'story' of past events, but also included many important documents on his policy, which had never before been made public. In addition to these *Memoirs*, Tirpitz continued publishing more important documents in 1923/24, first in an article in the *Marinerundschau*, then in a mixture of autobiographical and documentary work (*Politische Dokumente: Der Aufbau der deutschen Weltmacht*). Both editions aimed at defending his policy against his own critics within the navy as well as against members of the Foreign Office. In the early 1920s the latter had begun to publish a 40-volume compendium of documents on German foreign policy in the years 1871–1914 entitled *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914*.¹ The correspondence therein dealing with the build-up of the Imperial German Navy as well as the Anglo-German naval race was full of harsh criticisms of his attitude.

Tirpitz's death in 1930 and the rise of the Nazi Party to power in Germany more or less put an end to all serious research into German naval policy. Although the Marinearchiv continued collecting documents and interviewing members of Germany's pre-1914 naval leadership, the archives themselves remained closed to historians apart from very few exceptions. In some ways it was an irony of fate that in 1944, when defeat was imminent again, the navy resumed its work on writing a history of the 'Importance of Seapower for Germany', hoping to pave the way for a new navy in later years. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, one of Tirpitz's

¹J. Lepsius, et al., *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914*, 40 vols (Berlin, 1922–7).