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Naval Developments of 1912: The Great Arms Race

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In 1906, Adm. Sir John Fisher's revolutionary *HMS Dreadnought* rendered existing battleships obsolete and triggered a naval arms race between the two greatest industrial powers of Europe. The competition pitted their economic, political, and organizational systems against each other. Both sides, the British implicitly and the Germans explicitly, agreed that, if conflict came, it would focus on the North Sea. The island of Great Britain was a barrier that made the North Sea a virtual cul-de-sac: Germany had access to the open ocean only to the south, through the narrow English Channel, or seven hundred nautical miles to the north, between the Shetland Islands and the Norwegian coastal archipelago. Nautical geography, therefore, favored the British.

Well protected from invasion by its intimidating fleet and its island status, Britain had required only a small, well-trained volunteer army suited to its traditional task of defending the empire abroad, apart from larger wars in the Crimea and South Africa. Germany was substantially larger in population and needed a conscript army of millions to wage any anticipated war with its powerful continental neighbors, France and Russia.

In Britain, parliament regularly authorized annual appropriations for building warships. In Germany, Adm. Alfred von Tirpitz, State Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office, devised a long-term law in 1898, amended in 1900, 1906, 1908, and 1912, committing the Reichstag to fund construction of three capital ships per year, usually two battleships and one battlecruiser, with automatic replacement after twenty years. Partly in response to *Dreadnought*, the 1908 amendment stipulated four ships annually, to revert to two in 1912. Britain and Germany both had technologically advanced naval armaments industries. After 1906, ships grew substantially in size and catastrophically in costs.

Technologically, the new German ships were comparable to the *Dreadnought*, although they were a little slower and had slightly smaller guns and a shorter range of operation. On the other hand, they enjoyed thicker, better placed armor and nonpareil watertight integrity. The apparent statistical superiority of their ships made British admirals overconfident and their German counterparts too diffident. By the beginning of 1912, in the wake of periodic naval scares, Britain had completed or was building thirty-four modern capital ships, as compared to Germany's twenty.

Diplomatic and Military Consequences of the Naval Race

The year 1912 marked the culmination of the gradual fleet redistribution begun in 1904: Fisher's fleet reform had scrapped scores of obsolete ships and begun the secret process of building *Dreadnought* and *Invincible*; it also saved money by conserving crew from Britain's volunteer force. As Tirpitz's paper fleet began to turn into real ships by 1904, Fisher gradually withdrew some battleships and battlecruisers from the Mediterranean to the Home Fleet, thus undermining one of Tirpitz's original assumptions: that British worldwide commitments would make such a redistribution impossible.

By early 1912, both Austria and Italy were beginning Dreadnought programs. Nominally, Italy was allied with Germany and Austria. The British Admiralty knew Italy and Austria were building primarily against each other, but reduced British forces in the Mediterranean put the empire's communications at risk unless French help were available in the event of war. The British, therefore, had three choices: a binding alliance or naval agreement with France; a naval increase sufficient to secure both the North Sea and the Mediterranean; or execution of the Admiralty's plan to concentrate forces in the decisive theater. The final decision was a slippery and ambiguous combination of the first and third alternatives.

In July 1912, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, decided that North Sea supremacy had to trump all other strategic considerations. He resumed previous naval conversations with France. In September, the French Brest Squadron moved to Toulon, concentrating most of the French Navy's modern vessels in the Mediterranean. From a purely strategic viewpoint, this was the best the French could do, since they were far too weak to face Germany alone in the Channel. Conversely, the British were addressing the need for unassailable dominance in their home waters.

Such "independent" redistributions naturally raised speculation, especially in Germany, about whether a formal Anglo-French agreement underlay France's denuding of its Atlantic coast. Letters between the British and French Foreign Secretaries in November 1912 made clear that there was no such binding agreement, but did state that the two powers would consider unified action were the "general peace" to be threatened. These events morally, if not legally, obliged Britain to defend the French Atlantic coast in the event of a German attack.

Tirpitz's Influence Wanes

Since coming to office in 1897, Tirpitz had consistently striven for several goals. One was to build a fleet adequate to counter a British threat to German trade routes and seaports. A strong fleet, he hoped, would induce the British to come to terms with Germany on world economic matters. Indispensable to such a strategy was the ironclad support of Emperor William II. Tirpitz's ability to secure long-term Reichstag financing for a series of navy laws assured his monarch's favor. Although some historians believe Tirpitz intended to undermine the Reichstag, more recent research suggests he gained its consent by courting, not threatening, parliamentarians, especially those of the Catholic Center Party, which was dominant for most of Tirpitz's nineteen years in office. Complicating his relationship with the politicians were the hair-raising cost increases for shipbuilding in the aftermath of the British Dreadnought initiative. The 1912 naval law amendment marked Tirpitz's last successful finessing of the spending question.

The German tax system permitted no nationwide direct taxes and the upper classes refused to submit to democratic finance, unlike the more flexible British. Also, beginning in 1911, the sleeping giant, the German Army, slowly awakened. Since the 1890s, the army, which saw deterrence of domestic disorder as one of its main functions, had deliberately limited its growth. Burgeoning population growth, especially in cities, meant there were both more workers than loyal peasants in its ranks and more members of the bourgeoisie in its officer corps, since the traditional supply of aristocratic officers was shrinking in proportion. Militaristic pressure groups, more fearful of Germany's powerful neighbors than of insurrection, began to clamor for army expansion. By 1911, the navy was taking one-third of the defense budget. Tirpitz realized the army would now be a formidable competitor for scarce tax revenues.

Inept German diplomacy, particularly during the Agadir Crisis of 1911, drove Britain and France closer together, thwarting the German intention to drive them apart. While Tirpitz had sometimes used past crises to advance the navy law, he had usually opposed high profile diplomatic initiatives, preferring to "build and keep quiet." The principal exception was when he felt that the navy law was imperiled by, for example, the abortive Haldane Mission of early 1912.

Pressure from Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg to ease Anglo-German tensions forced Tirpitz to limit ship construction essentially to two per year from 1912 to 1917; he despaired that the permanent three per year tempo, due to resume in 1918, was a dead letter. His domination of other branches of the navy, though still strong, was for the first time under serious attack. Seagoing officers forced him to forsake his obsession with capital ship construction, take submarines more seriously, and give greater priority to preparedness.

Another long-term nightmare for Tirpitz was the looming menace of the new class of British Dreadnoughts, the five *Queen Elizabeths*, the first two of which were laid down late in 1912. These were fast, oil-fired vessels equipped with eight 15-inch guns. Matching this would be so expensive as to exceed even Tirpitz's political legerdemain; hence, from 1912 on, his expectations for the future grew ever more pessimistic.

Operational Plans in 1912

There is a certain inevitability about seeing the North Sea as the prospective theater of a naval war between Britain and Germany. If there had never been a Schlieffen Plan, which, until the eve of war, was known only to the Emperor and the General Staff, Britain might never have entered a continental war. Nevertheless, hindsight must sometimes be served.

For most of the prewar period, British war plans blithely ignored the drastic changes that steam power—and the concomitant incessant need for recoaling—brought to a traditional strategy of close blockade. Until almost 1912, the British planned to penetrate the Helgoland Bight with light ships, while heavier units would remain offshore but within supporting range. In 1912, Fisher's successor as First Sea Lord, Arthur Wilson, recognizing the dangers (mines and torpedoes) and logistical problems of close blockade, switched to an "observational" blockade, with a picket line well outside of Helgoland Bight and the main fleet stationed farther north and west. But this alternative, with a line about three hundred miles long, ultimately entailed attritional problems similar to those of a close blockade. In spring 1914, the Admiralty abandoned the observational blockade to take full advantage of the geographical conundrum the North Sea posed for the Germans. With the Channel closed and the Grand Fleet based far to the north in Scapa Flow, German hopes for a battle against part of the fleet within fifty miles of Helgoland ended forever.

German planning was more complicated: by 1905 the Admiralty Staff, nominally in charge of war planning, saw vividly that a war with Britain would be a fiasco and effectively gave up serious planning. But the Agadir Crisis reawakened the possibility of such a war. The Admiralty Staff had the further problem that no one paid them much attention. If they proposed a plan that the Fleet Chief or Tirpitz or the Emperor did not like, it was ignored. One Admiralty Staff Chief, Max Fischel, resigned in disgust when the Emperor sat through one of his briefings reading a horse journal. An officer cynically noted: "Here we change chiefs as fast as an express train passes by telephone poles" (Kelly, 321).

When the first German Dreadnoughts came into service in 1910, the navy lost its interior lines until the widening of the Kaiser Wilhelm (Kiel) Canal was completed in 1914. Where, then, to base the fleet—Kiel or Wilhelmshaven? The eventual decision for the latter was on Tirpitz's mind at the much overblown "War Council" of 8 December 1912, when he disagreed with the army's dictum "war, the sooner the better." Unrealistically aggressive war plans for an attack on the presumably closely blockading British Fleet went, theoretically, into force. In 1912, Adm. August von Heeringen made a casual but prophetic remark about a war game: "If the English really adopt a distant blockade, with a consequent holding back of their battleships, the wartime role of our beautiful High Seas Fleet will be a very unhappy one. The U-boats would then have to [carry on the war]" (Kelly, 365). Despite prewar bluster, the actual naval war plan issued on 31 July 1914 was simply to stay home and wait on events.

Other Naval Developments of 1912

By 1912, Dreadnought fever had seized the industrialized world, afflicting even lesser powers like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Turkey, and Greece, who ordered ships built abroad. By the time France and Russia entered the fray, fully fourteen countries were already building Dreadnoughts. Submarines left behind dangerous gasoline-powered engines in favor of safer, more efficient diesels. Torpedoes continued to improve. Still, not even their strongest advocates envisioned the use of submarines in a high seas commerce war. Airplanes were still curiosities, although Germany did make a serious effort to build Zeppelins.

Conclusions

The naval arms race was beginning to abate when Tirpitz publicly stated that the 1912 amendment to the navy law would be his last. Anglo-German arms talks ceased and, since no one was planning further major initiatives, tensions eased. British patriotism, financial resources, and favorable tax system had beaten back

the German challenge. Germany, for its part, turned to the expansion of its army, which was accomplished by the great army bill of 1913. France and Russia soon responded and the optimistic war plans that led to the crisis of 1914 continued to evolve.

The events of 1912 exposed the dysfunction of the German government. There was no coordinated war planning: the navy wanted the army to invade Denmark and ignore Belgium, and the army wanted to invade Belgium and ignore Denmark. A wiser emperor might have perceived the mortal danger of the Schlieffen Plan and the value of preserving the peace.

Recommended Reading

- Herwig, Holger H. *"Luxury Fleet": The Imperial German Navy, 1888–1918*. Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1980.
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- Marder, Arthur J. *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vol. 1: *The Road to War, 1904–1914*. NY: Oxford U Pr, 1961.
- Padfield, Peter. *The Great Naval Race: Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900–1914*. NY: McKay, 1974.