



Military Intelligence from Germany, 1906–1914 by Matthew S. Seligmann.

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With the publication of this book, prolific historian Matthew Seligmann closes the circle he began to draw in his seminal study *Spies in Uniform*,¹ which showed that the reports of British military and naval attachés in Germany strongly influenced Great Britain's preparations for the First World War. He followed this up with a 600-page collection of British naval attachés' reports from Germany between 1906 and 1914.² In every case, his work is based on painstaking research in relevant archives.³

Military Intelligence from Germany provides the pertinent source materials from the British military attachés in "a study of the overt gathering of military intelligence on Germany by the British Army in the immediate run-up to the First World War" (1). Like Seligmann's earlier work, this book counters the conventional wisdom⁴ that British military attachés' reports were of little use to Great Britain in preparing for war with Germany. In fact, he asserts, the dispatches provide

documentary evidence that conclusively demonstrates that Britain's military attachés provided, as was the intention behind their appointment, both a steady stream of technical information on the German armed forces and regular reliable appraisals of the mood of the German military authorities in respect to peace and war. As will be shown, these were vital sources that played a substantial role in shaping the British picture of Germany and the intentions of its rulers, a fact that poses some obvious questions about how and why Britain's military attachés came to be in Germany in the first place. (2)

The book presents reports spanning the years 1906–14, the period when, as received opinion would have it, the First Moroccan Crisis (1905–6) ignited a series of prewar Great Power confrontations. The author's choice of these eight years was "further determined by the availability of records, a matter that is itself a factor of serendipity, wartime enemy action and the adoption of particular filing systems" (8).

The dispatches were written during the successive attaché tenures of Col. Frederic J.A. Trench (1906–10) and Col. Alick V.F.V. Russell (1910–14). Trench had served as an artillery officer in the South African (Second Boer) War of 1899–1902. Kaiser Wilhelm II essentially nominated him to succeed Count Edward Gleichen, whose spectacular falling-out with the Emperor made him persona non grata in Germany. Fifty-two of Trench's dispatches are reproduced. They concern primarily two topics: first, Germany's actions in South-West Africa, especially its horrific policies toward native tribes, which interested Trench due to his earlier observation of German forces in action there; second, and more in-

1. Subtitle: *British Military and Naval Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2006).

2. *Naval Intelligence from Germany: The Reports of the British Naval Attachés in Berlin, 1906–1914* (NY: Routledge, 2007). See also his *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901–1914: Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War against Germany* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012), with review at *MiWSR* 2013-064.

3. Most recently, he has co-edited a historiographical review and collection of British and German documents on the Germany vs. Britain naval arms race preceding World War I: Seligmann, Frank Nægler, and Michael Epkenhans, eds., *The Naval Route to the Abyss: The Anglo-German Naval Race 1895–1914* (NY: Routledge, 2016).

4. See, e.g., Paul M. Kennedy, "Great Britain before 1914," in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1984) 172–203.

teresting, what he perceived as a growing Anglophobia—both civilian and military—in Germany during his time in Berlin. After a conversation with a German staff officer, he reported (4 Dec. 1908) on “a wide-spread conviction that a conflict with England is not only inevitable but desirable” (78). Trench also frequently describes German innovations in dirigible and other aircraft, which he foresaw being deployed to attack Great Britain and facilitate an invasion.

Russell, an officer in the Grenadier Guards, was born and raised in Germany while his father, Lord Odo Russell, served as Great Britain’s first ambassador to the German Empire. As a result, he had great familiarity with the country and spoke German fluently. The fifty-eight of his dispatches included in *Military Intelligence from Germany* provide a different perspective from Trench’s. Russell was initially impressed with Germany’s military preparedness, especially as compared with France’s. He reported back to Britain (23 Sept. 1911) “with a strong conviction that one looks in vain for any sign of real weakness in the military strength of the German Empire” (130). His conversations with the Kaiser “gave evidence ... of a passionate desire on His Majesty’s part of a political understanding with England” (127).

But Russell’s assessment changed after the Second Moroccan Crisis, in which Great Britain sided with France and thereby dealt a diplomatic blow to the German Empire. He observed (27 Oct. 1911) “that the confidence of the German people in the perfection and invincibility of their military forces, and particularly in the matter of the superiority of these forces over those of France, has been slightly shaken in the last few weeks” (132). Russell saw the ensuing increases in military spending and other preparations as actions that “must be designed for offence or rather aggression” (135).

Like Trench, Russell often reported on Germany’s advances in aircraft design. His 1912 meeting with Dutch aviation innovator Anton Fokker, whom Germany had retained to engineer airplanes, were especially enlightening. Russell noted the “extraordinary steadiness” of Fokker’s design and “strongly urge[d] that the machines made by this young man not only not be lost sight of, but that some further action be taken in this matter” (154). Of course, Fokker designed Imperial Germany’s most successful World War I aircraft.

Although their perspectives are not identical, Trench and Russell concurred that “Germany was a power with significant political ambitions and an aggressive agenda” (14). Trench based his conclusion on, in his view, the rampant Anglophobia in Imperial Germany, while Russell stressed that Germany’s reaction to diplomatic setbacks was to increase armaments and to plan for war to ensure the nation’s security.

Seligmann provides a brief, persuasive discussion of the effects of the military attachés’ dispatches in both the Foreign Office and the War Office. He notes, for instance, that the former agreed with Trench that the German Navy League was rallying public enthusiasm for war against Great Britain. Eyre Crowe, a respected Foreign Office expert on Germany, and Edmund Slade, Director of Naval Intelligence in the Admiralty, agreed with these observations. In addition, Seligmann shows that, despite the destruction of the original War Office files, Trench’s opinions on Germany’s plans for an invasion of Britain—something the War Office publicly claimed was impossible—in fact coincided with the private views of many War Office personnel. In short, “it is clear that the reports from Berlin were not ignored. Their role in shaping and reinforcing perceptions of German hostile intent across various branches of the British government in the run-up to the First World War is, thus, evident” (24).

Seligmann’s scrupulous citation of the archival source for each report will be a boon for researchers and historians interested in his subject. The same may be said for his helpful notes clarifying the identities of key individuals mentioned in the reports, as well as the various newspapers and publications referenced therein. Though he includes only 110 dispatches owing to the scarcity of extant copies, Matthew Seligmann must be congratulated for the service he has performed for military historians by highlighting the value of those reports to British policymakers prior to the First World War.