

Was Germany's Naval Policy 1898-1914 a reasonable policy?

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German Naval Policy 1898-1914

Germany began expanding its navy drastically at the turn of the 20th century. This expansion threatened a delicate balance of power and troublesome diplomatic climate that would eventually lead to the catastrophe known as the Great War. Many scholars believe that the German naval policy of enlarging its fleet started an arms race with Great Britain and contributed to World War One and Great Britain's involvement in that war. As a result, it is important to determine whether Germany's naval policy at the time was reasonable or a mistake. Some scholars believe that the policy was ludicrous and unnecessary while the German government at the time certainly believed it to be an intelligent approach. This paper will present both arguments and then evaluate each argument's evidence and logic and come to a conclusion on the question of whether Germany's naval policy from 1898-1914 was reasonable.

The German naval policy from 1898-1914 was unreasonable for political, economic, diplomatic and military reasons. The policy was designed to have a range of effects including defending coastline, providing diplomatic leverage, expanding overseas, helping and protecting the economy and challenging the

British fleet. Holger H. Herwig and E.L. Woodard provide evidence denouncing the German naval policy of expansion beginning with the naval laws of 1898 and 1900 and finishing with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Their arguments are based on the lack of benefits and problems caused politically, economically, diplomatically and militarily to Germany as a result of their plan.

Politically, Germany suffered as a result of their naval policy. The colonial aspect of the policy failed to provide an outlet to Germany's excess population.¹ Fewer than 6,000 Germans lived in their colonies and most German emigrants still traveled to the United States. Another domestic issue that naval expansion had damaged was the politics in the Reichstag. The Reichstag, or German Parliament, did not have the same influence as its British counterpart. However, the State's finances were handled by this body. The naval policy by 1914 had fragmented the bourgeois parties in the Reichstag and damaged relations between it and the Kaiser.² The cause for fragmentation was over financial problems. Furthermore, the Kaiser was determined to protect each of the 6,000 Germans with his proposed "High Seas Fleet". The policy on economic grounds would not justify the political problems that it caused.

The naval policy touched on several economic issues, both domestic and foreign. As far as the colonies were concerned, they did not supply raw materials for industry nor did they provide a location for investment by German

¹ Holger H. Herwig, "Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918 (London 1980) p.107

² Ibid p.91

bankers and businessmen.³ Furthermore, the fleet needed to protect these colonies of which only Togoland and Samoa did not need government subsidy.⁴ The navies of this time period relied on coal for power and needed coaling stations around the world. Germany had to buy some islands for this purpose, further draining the treasury. Finally, Germany's reason for needing a battle fleet based on concerns of British jealousy over Germany's trade and prosperity were unfounded. German competition was not undermining British prosperity and the British had no intention of harming German trade.⁵ In fact, the two countries benefited from each others prosperity and war would damage Great Britain's economy and that of an excellent customer.⁶ Therefore, the Germans did not need to expand the fleet in order to protect their commerce.

The German naval policy was a disaster diplomatically as well. The British were obviously provoked by the policy for "without a navy Great Britain was a disarmed state."⁷ Britain was a natural ally of Germany with few common conflicting interests and two common threats, France and Russia. The policy actually counted on Britain being on bad terms with France and Russia, but ironically contributed to Britain's desire to improve its relationship with France and Russia.⁸ The Germans were more likely to show force, as they did during the Moroccan Crisis, which left them diplomatically isolated except for Austria-

³ Ibid p.107

⁴ E.L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Hamden, 1964) p.44

⁵ Ibid p.14-15, 41-42

⁶ Ibid p.46

⁷ Ibid p.15

⁸ Ibid p.37, 69

Hungary. Clearly, the naval policy backfired and severely weakened the Germans' diplomatic situation.

The failure of the policy was no exception in respect to military affairs. The diplomatic failures of the policy made military success more difficult and more necessary. Unfortunately for Germany, the High Seas Fleet would not even be ready until the early 1920's.⁹ However, there were larger problems for Germany's navy. Germany's navy was smaller than Great Britain's navy and the British had a higher output of ships, thus the Germans would not reach the critical 2:3 German to British ratio they desired. The German assumption that Britain could not defend both the homeland and colonies was mistaken. The British left their outdated warships on patrol and concentrated the newer fleets in home waters. Finally, as the Great War itself proved, the German High Seas fleet was hardly useful once war was declared.

Clearly, the Germans thought that their policy was a reasonable and intelligent policy to pursue. Admiral von Tirpitz, Kaiser Wilhelm II and others promoted the policy for political, economic, diplomatic and military benefit.

The naval policy of expansion could be a political asset to those in control of the government. Building contracts for new ships would bring prosperity to industry, and more important politically, to the proletariat.¹⁰ The more content the proletariat, the easier it was for the Kaiser to maintain his power over the

⁹ Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London, 1997) p.19

¹⁰ Holger H. Herwig, "Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918 (London 1980) p. 39

Reichstag. Furthermore, the industrialists would continue to support the political status quo and the middle class would turn their ambitions toward overseas expansion. The navy's expansion itself was to be as disconnected from the Reichstag as possible, also ensuring the Kaiser's power over the Social Democrats.¹¹ Different segments of the German population benefited from the naval policy. Politically the prosperity aided the Kaiser and as such the policy was not only reasonable, but advantageous.

The economic benefits provided by the naval policy included the prosperity mentioned above and ship contracts that would help hurdle the vicissitudes of the capitalist business cycle.¹² However, the main purpose of the expansion of the navy was to protect commerce. One fourth of Germany's population lived on imported corn and several German economists feared a British or European Zollverein.¹³ These fears had some basis for the Anglo-German commercial treaty of 1865 was not renewed in 1897.¹⁴ The imposition of a customs union was a peacetime concern. Germany also feared a blockade and commercial war.¹⁵ The best way to meet these threats was through the construction of a formidable navy.

The diplomatic aims of the German naval policy were varied. Primarily, they wanted to be able to exert pressure as they had been unable to do during the

¹¹ Ibid p.35

¹² Ibid p.35

¹³ E.L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Hamden, 1964) p. 47

¹⁴ Ibid p. 25

¹⁵ Ibid p.32, 34

Boer War.¹⁶ Later the expanded fleet would act as a deterrent by being large enough that the risk of engaging it would be too high.¹⁷ It was also thought that the naval policy could provoke the British to create a North Seas fleet, which would threaten not just Germany and thus open opportunities for alliances with minor naval powers.¹⁸ Finally, in 1912, Bethmann Hollweg offered to slow the naval program in exchange for British neutrality in the event of war.¹⁹ The British declined the offer, and therefore it made no sense to stop building. The naval policy was designed to enhance Germany's diplomatic power and prevent war by creating a deterrent.

The German naval policy contained military merit as well. By Tirpitz's calculation, in order to defend Germany, the Kriegsmarine could achieve a 2:3 German to British capital ship ratio and would maintain two-thirds of the fleet active compared to the British one-half.²⁰ In addition to reaching the desired ship quantity, the German navy had higher quality ships, better trained crews, better leadership and a better command structure than the British. Tirpitz also wagered that the British would be unwilling to leave their colonies undefended, increasing Germany's odds further. These factors made the navy policy a viable factor for a military engagement.

¹⁶ Ibid p.24

¹⁷ H. Herwig, "Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918 (London 1980) p.36

¹⁸ Ibid p.91

¹⁹ Ibid p.73

²⁰ Ibid p.36

Both theses have flaws but the second thesis lacks the benefit of hindsight. By the time war broke out in 1914, the naval policy had not achieved its goals and Britain had produced more capital ships. Thus the whole policy would have been better off never initiated due to its antagonistic nature. On the other hand, the first thesis overlooks certain aspects of the period. "One must take for granted...that a disarmed nation would be at the mercy of other Powers who would at once take advantage of their superior force."²¹ This statement was believed by the majority of Europe and not even disputed by the socialist minority. With this in mind, and the seemingly impossible alliance of Great Britain with France or Russia in 1898, the naval policy does not seem so unreasonable. Each thesis has supporting evidence, but a key difference lies in the conclusions drawn from them. The first thesis, perhaps due to hindsight and knowledge, draws much more logical conclusions from the evidence. Tirpitz's risk theory, even at the time, could have drawn different conclusions, many more logical, from the evidence and situation. In fact, it appears that Tirpitz did not even consider some aspects thoroughly; especially what happens after Britain declares war. Overall, the first thesis provides a much more sound argument, partly due to hindsight, but also because the thesis is argued by non-bias authors who are not power hungry or have national interests at stake.

The two theses are easy to summarize. The first thesis points out the flaws of Germany's naval policy 1898-1914 and concludes that it was unreasonable.

²¹ E.L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Hamden, 1964) p.10

The second thesis points to the advantages that could be gained by such a policy and concludes it to be reasonable and desirable. The first thesis lacks the feeling of the time the policy was proposed and has the benefit of hindsight which gives the first argument an enormous advantage. The strongest points made are that the creation of a battle fleet was needless to protect any of Germany's interests and that diplomatically it proved to be disastrous. The second thesis, if considered during its time period, argues that there were many benefits available by the creation of a high seas fleet. There were some illogical conclusions drawn from the evidence, but overall the evidence *in consideration* by the Kaiser and Tirpitz does support the conclusions. The strongest point made is that the policy provides excellent domestic political and economic benefits. Even the authors of the first thesis would agree, at least at the start of the policy, that Germany benefited domestically in a political and economic manner. The idea of increasing industry was a good move and the proletariat of Germany did benefit. However, the degree of the policy was too extreme. Perhaps a program of expanding the fleet could have been introduced to capture some of the benefits without provoking the British. If this had been the policy of Germany in 1898, then the future would have considered it reasonable, and Germany would have been in a much better diplomatic situation in 1914.

