

# **“LUXURY” FLEET**

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The Imperial German Navy 1888–1918

Holger H. Herwig

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Volume 7

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The Imperial German Navy  
1888–1918

HOLGER H. HERWIG

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*The Imperial German Navy 1888–1918*

HOLGER H. HERWIG

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*In Memory of My Grandfather,  
Hermann Strauss*



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*“The German Emperor is ageing me; he is like a battleship with steam up and screws going, but with no rudder, and he will run into something some day and cause a catastrophe.”*

— Sir Edward Grey

## *Abbreviations and Conversions*

mm	.....	1 millimetre (0.039 inches)
cm	.....	1 centimetre (0.39 inches)
m	.....	1 metre (1.09 yards; 3.28 feet)
km	.....	1 kilometre (0.6 miles; 1,093.6 yards)
kg	.....	1 kilogram (2.2 pounds)
t	.....	1 tonne (0.984 British long tons)
sm	.....	1 seemeile, 1 nautical mile (1.85 kilometre; 6,080 feet)
kn	.....	1 knot per hour (6,080 feet p.h.; 1.15 miles p.h.; 1.85 kilometre p.h.)
GM	.....	1 Goldmark (6.146 grains of gold, 900 fine, or British standard gold in the value of 11.747 <i>d</i> , of £0.0489; US \$ 28.8 cents)
in	.....	1 inch (2.5 centimetres)
ft	.....	1 foot (0.3 metres)
yd	.....	1 yard (0.9 metres)
mile	.....	1 mile (1.6 kilometres)
lb	.....	1 pound avoirdupois (0.4536 kilograms; 453.6 grams)
ton	.....	1 British long ton (2,240 pounds; 1.016 tonne)
£	.....	1 pound sterling (20.40 Goldmarks; \$4.85)
hp	.....	1 horse power (550 foot-pounds per second; power required to lift 75 kilograms one metre high)

## *Introduction*

On 27 June 1897 the Royal Navy flaunted its maritime supremacy at Spithead before the assembled leaders of the Empire who had come to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Six mighty columns, each of five miles length, paraded an awesome array of 165 British warships. *The Times* was barely able to maintain its reserve: "It is at once the most powerful and far-reaching weapon which the world has ever seen." Since 1805, when Britain crushed the combined fleets of France and Spain off Cape Trafalgar, there had occurred no major naval challenge. Her traditional enemies, France and Russia, were scarcely in a position to threaten her at sea and the emergence of two new navies, those of the United States and Japan, posed no menace at the turn of the century. Britannia did, indeed, rule the waves. Her naval ship designs were eagerly copied everywhere, her training missions visited foreign lands from Turkey to Japan, her shipyards were purveyors to the nations of every continent, the dress of her officers and ratings had become universal, and – also importantly – her proud naval tradition and history commanded respect from those who were eye-witnesses of the review.

But storm clouds were already ominously gathering on the horizon. In the same year as the Diamond Jubilee Germany announced her intention to create a sizeable battle fleet, one that, as it was soon realized in London, would be concentrated primarily in the North Sea. Britain, on the other hand, did not maintain a single first-class naval station along her eastern coastline. In the Navy Bills of 1898 and 1900, augmented by Supplementary Bills in 1906, 1908 and 1912, the Reich proposed to create a modern battle fleet of 41 battleships, 20 large cruisers and 40 light cruisers. Such a force, expected to be second only to that of Great Britain, would complement the most efficient army certainly in Europe and possibly in the world.

Germany already possessed by 1900 the nucleus of a colonial empire. Under Chancellor Otto v. Bismarck she had acquired in the 1880s German South-West Africa, Togoland, the Cameroons, German East Africa, German New Guinea, and the Marshall



Islands. To be added to this later were Kiaochow, the Caroline, Palau and Mariana islands, and parts of Samoa. German merchant lines such as the Hamburg–America Line and the North German Lloyd were opening up new trade routes from the Orinoco to the Yangtze rivers. Her industry flooded world markets with efficient and dynamic salesmen, and pressure groups at home clamoured incessantly for new overseas possessions. Nor was the academic community immune to this development: in the years between 1897 and 1906, no less than 270 so-called "fleet professors" actively worked on behalf of the navy in raising support among the German people and government for the construction of a mighty battle fleet.

Behind this feverish activity stood the influence and power of German business and industry. Friedrich Krupp, Albert Ballin, Arthur Gwinner, and Adolf Woermann were just a few who underwrote the fleet propaganda. German production since 1871 had been spectacular. Her coal output had risen from 38,000,000 tons in 1871 to 179,000,000 tons in 1913, and by 1910 she produced annually 13,000,000 tons of steel – some 5,000,000 tons more than Great Britain and second only to the United States. Her population by 1914 had increased to 67,000,000 people, a 60 per cent rise since the end of the wars of unification in 1871 (41,000,000), and along with a healthy birthrate of 1 per cent per annum, the depressing flow of emigration had ebbed from a high in 1881 of 221,000 to slightly more than 30,000 per year by the turn of the century. The population flow from country to city trebled the number of major cities and doubled the urban population by 1900 (30,000,000). The upshot of rapid industrialization, combined with this demographic shift, was that the working class increased from one-fifth of the German *Volk* in 1870 to one-third in 1907. The Reich's merchant fleet (ships over 100 t) grew meteorically from 82,000 tons in 1872 to 5,134,000 tons by 1914. Other branches of industry, such as textiles, electricity, chemical products, and machine making, among others, witnessed equal or even greater growth. And her four major private banks (Deutsche, Dresdner, Diskonto, and Darmstädter) financed railway construction, especially in Turkey and Venezuela.

These impersonal statistics take on meaning if one thinks of them in terms of blast furnaces, rolling mills, rail networks, factory chimneys, and generators producing the steel, energy and tools necessary to construct a modern battle fleet, as well as to meet the

demands of the world's major markets. Moreover, there burst upon the scene in June 1888 the last of the Hohenzollerns: Wilhelm II, German Emperor and King of Prussia, as he believed, by the Grace of God. Dynamic, impetuous, aggressive, yet at the same time insecure, nervous, hesitant, Wilhelm quickly gathered around him an entourage of advisors who catered to his every whim while at the same time taking advantage of his weaknesses. With the appointment in June 1897 of Alfred Tirpitz to the Navy Office (*Reichs-Marine-Amt*) and Bernard v. Bülow to the Foreign Office, a "New Course" was clearly charted.

In terms of national psychology, the time was also opportune. A generation had grown to adulthood since the wars of unification and had tired of the endless *Bierhalle* discussions concerning the daring deeds of their fathers in Bismarck's campaigns against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866-7) and France (1870-1), and of the Iron Chancellor's "satiated" Reich. The movement from farm to city had become a veritable flood and the vision of a rustic Germany ruled by country *Junker* had long ceased to correspond to reality. Through organizations such as the Colonial League and the Navy League, young Germans expressed a desire to expand beyond the Continent.

Wilhelm II became the spokesman for this age. Much more than the Iron Chancellor in the Sachsenwald at Friedrichsruh, he represented the dreams as well as the potential might of this new generation. His blustering speeches, his sabre-rattling, but also his support of modern technology, education and industry, typified post-Bismarckian Germany. The restraint and moderation imposed upon Germany's foreign policy after 1871 by Bismarck were cast aside; the new slogans centred around a future on the seas, around *Weltmacht* and *Weltpolitik*. And while many aspirations could be realized through preying on what were considered "dying" colonial powers – Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark – there constantly remained the ultimate challenge: Great Britain. The Reich's extremely unfavourable maritime geographical position denied her free access to the shipping lanes of the Atlantic Ocean and beyond, and this disadvantage Tirpitz sought to overcome by concentrating in the North Sea an armada of superior German battleships "in the form of a sharp knife, held gleaming and ready only a few inches away from the jugular vein of Germany's most likely enemy" (Paul M. Kennedy).

Germany's calculated risk in challenging unilaterally the British

naval supremacy in the North Sea in order thereby to wring from London colonial concessions and possibly an alliance, stampeded the major powers into a naval arms race that has found its equal only in the recent Soviet-American arms race. By August 1914, Britain had 20 Dreadnought battleships in commission with a further 14 either under construction or planned for completion by 1916; she also possessed 9 battle-cruisers operational. Germany, on the other hand, had 15 Dreadnoughts in service in August 1914 and an additional 4 scheduled for operations by 1916; 6 battle-cruisers were either operational or near completion, with a further 2 due for sea duty by 1917.

But war came for Germany in 1914 some eight years too early. Naval construction was 8 battleships, 7 large and 6 light cruisers behind schedule, while the fleet of 60 capital ships envisaged in Tirpitz's master plan would be ready to challenge the Royal Navy only in 1922, or thereafter. Moreover, one of the most poignant ironies must surely be that these vast naval squadrons did not engage in a single decisive encounter in the North Sea between 1914 and 1918. The chance meeting of the fleets on the last day of May 1916 off Jutland was broken off before either side could land a telling blow, and has accordingly become the object of impassioned debate and bitter acrimony. The war at sea was to be fought most intensely by submarines and escort craft – to the dismay of flag-officers on both sides. And the end came with a whimper in the form of the surrender of the Imperial German Navy in November 1918 in the wake of rebellion and revolution, and the decision to scuttle the fleet during internment at Scapa Flow in June 1919.

It is necessary, then, to analyse the “Tirpitz” fleet in terms of *matériel* and manpower in its European setting, and also to place it within the German situation in general between 1888 and 1918. This is not first and foremost a work of new research, rather it strives instead to present the general reader with an overview of recent historical investigation by Volker R. Berghahn, Wilhelm Deist, Friedrich Forstmeier, Eckart Kehr, Paul M. Kennedy, and many others. I have also incorporated into the book my earlier researches dealing with the naval officer corps and various aspects of German naval history: *The German Naval Officer Corps: A Social and Political History 1890–1918* (Oxford, 1973); *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1888–1941* (Boston, 1976). Much of the documentation has been gleaned

from the German Federal-Military Archives – see Reference Literature, p. 258 – while supporting material is listed separately; translations from the German are my own and have been made as far as possible to conform to ordinary English usage. German names are left as in the original. Many issues, designs, battles, strategies, and events will either be glossed over or entirely omitted; it is hoped, however, that those treated will afford the reader a clearer perception of the role that the “luxury” fleet, as Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty in February 1912 termed it, played in German and especially in European affairs in this exciting and fateful period.

Nashville, Tennessee  
November 1978

H.H.H.

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## *Part One*

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# I

## Modest Beginnings

### *The Prussian/German Naval Tradition to 1888*

Germany did not possess a strong, continuous naval tradition. Becoming a nation only in January 1871, Germany lacked the experience of Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, or Great Britain. The approximately 360 states that comprised the Holy Roman Empire in the eighteenth century did not have either the will or the potential for naval enterprise. After all, what could one expect of Anhalt-Zerbst, Schaumburg-Lippe, Baden, Bavaria, or even Prussia, especially at a time when the Continent was engrossed in a 200-year struggle to prevent French hegemony? No less a German naval enthusiast than Alfred Tirpitz noted upon entering the Prussian Navy in 1865 that there was little enthusiasm for this force among the German people.

This notwithstanding, some German naval officers and historians later attempted to trace the genesis of a modern German battle fleet through the ages. Hugo v. Waldeyer-Hartz dated the concept of a German navy back to the Vikings, and Rear-Admiral Adolf v. Trotha to the Hanseatic League of the thirteenth century or, at the latest, to the Great Elector's plans for Prussian colonial expansion in the seventeenth century. But there was no continuity, no strong naval tradition in Prussia. The Hanseatic League had declined precipitously by the end of the thirteenth century. And the ambitious schemes of Friedrich Wilhelm, the Great Elector (1640–88), to found a Prussian colony in West Africa and a modest merchant marine and navy with the aid of the Dutchman Benjamin Raule came to naught. There existed in Prussia no wealthy group of merchants willing to invest in the Elector's plans and the Court quickly tired of being coerced to invest in the project; the Dutch



swept Raule's forces off the seas as soon as they constituted a nuisance to them. Moreover, King Friedrich Wilhelm I (1713–40) abolished the nascent Brandenburg–African Company in 1711 and sold what little remained of both the merchant fleet and the navy at bargain prices.

Nor did Friedrich II (1740–86) share the Great Elector's dreams of overseas empire. In fact, for much of the eighteenth century Prussia and Austria were locked in a mortal struggle for supremacy in Central Europe, a course of events that allowed little time for naval development. Joseph II of Austria alone made an effort to enhance Austria's naval presence in the Adriatic Sea in the 1780s, while Friedrich II under his policy of *rétablissement* poured vast sums of money into rebuilding his war-ravaged territories.

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic era stifled any attempt to increase the Prussian fleet. In the wake of the humiliating defeats at Jena and Auerstädt in 1806, Prussia was forced to adhere to Napoleon Bonaparte's Continental System, with the result that Great Britain seized some 300 Prussian barges and coastal vessels and thereby virtually ended all Prussian sea traffic. Moreover, the Wars of Liberation were fought between 1813 and 1815 by a Prussian Army whose officer corps was totally dominated by the landed gentry (*Junker*). Field Marshal Gebhard v. Blücher's victory at Waterloo and subsequent occupation of Paris further enhanced Prussia's role as a dominant land power; Nelson's decisive victories at Aboukir and Trafalgar were not generally appreciated or understood in assessing Napoleon's defeat.

The Congress of Vienna rekindled a flicker of naval enthusiasm in Prussia by awarding that country the last remnants of Swedish territory, including the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea as well as six Swedish gunsloops. Between October and December 1815, these ships were organized into the newly-formed “Royal Prussian Navy” and two Swedish officers became the first – and until 1848 the only – naval officers of Prussia. To be sure, it was a modest beginning. Several prominent Germans advocated that this force be enlarged; they included Prince Adalbert of Prussia, nephew of King Friedrich Wilhelm III (1798–1840), Friedrich List the economist and founder of the *Zollverein*, or customs union, and Professor Jakob Grimm of Göttingen University, the famous philologist and mythologist. In December 1841 Prussia joined Great Britain, Russia, France, and Austria in suppressing the slave trade in the Atlantic Ocean, but throughout the 1840s Prussian

leaders still regarded the Netherlands as a sort of German "admiralty state" that could protect the "German" interests on the high seas. Yet the greatest impetus for navalism lay just round the corner, in the liberal *Bürger* who sat in the Frankfurt National Assembly in 1848-9.

This national parliament, which had been convened after the outbreak of revolution in order to draft a constitution and to bring about German unification, found itself powerless to oppose the Danish Navy in the struggle over the disputed duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and thus turned to the idea of building a German navy. A national fleet, the argument went, would spur on the German people toward unification; it would overcome the purely particularist influence of the various German armies. In June 1848 the parliamentary deputies appointed Archduke Johann of Austria Imperial Administrator (*Reichsverweser*); in November they created a "Naval Commission" under Prince Adalbert to supervise the proposed naval construction. The assembly "granted" 6 million thalers – slightly less than £1 million sterling – for naval expenditure. Prince Adalbert proposed to build a fleet consisting of 20 ships of the line and 20 large and 10 small cruising ships. Officers and men for the fleet were to be recruited in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States, because German states lacked experienced naval personnel.

The National Assembly was not destined to realize this ambitious programme. The few ships that were built or purchased were eventually taken over by Prussia in 1852 (*Barbarossa*, *Eckernförde*) and became the nucleus under Prince Adalbert for the navy of the North German Confederation (1867-70), and subsequently of the German Empire. The remaining 9 warships and 27 smaller craft were sold to bidders at bargain prices. Only the dream of the Frankfurt liberals of building a German navy survived and transcended the narrow bounds of particularism, notably among the bourgeois intellectual and industrial elite. But the black-red-gold ensign was not to be broken on a German warship for another 104 years.

The embryonic Prussian Navy was to carry on the dream of a grand German fleet. In November 1853 the naval administration was taken out of the Prussian War Ministry, and an independent Admiralty under Prince Adalbert was created; in March 1854 Adalbert received the cumbersome title of "Admiral of the Prussian Coasts" after King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1840-61) had ruled

out "Fleet Admiral" because "we do not have a fleet". More importantly, in November 1854 Prussia acquired from Oldenburg the Jade river area, the future site of her major North Sea naval station (Wilhelmshaven, founded in 1869). In terms of administration, it was an uneasy and indecisive period. The Prussian Admiralty in March 1859 was transformed into the Supreme Command of the Navy and the Naval Administration; the latter, in turn, gave way in April 1861 to the Ministry of Marine under General Albrecht v. Roon. Naval construction was severely limited during this era. Paddle-wheelers and sailships were slowly giving way to steam, and wood was yielding to steel. Germany, with insufficient naval technical personnel and almost no modern shipyards, was unable to make the transition. Her small fleet became more out-dated year by year.

Otto v. Bismarck's unification "from above", by virtue of Prussia's successive military victories over Denmark, Austria and France rather than by popular election or consent, ultimately resolved the burning issue of Germany's quest for nationhood, but not the quest for a navy. The Austro-Prussian war with Denmark in 1864 marked the first time since the days of the Great Elector that Prussian warships operated in foreign waters, but the Army quickly subdued the Danes and thereby again asserted its primacy in Prussian affairs. In addition, Prussia still lacked shipyards and had to rely on foreign builders: in August 1864 the first Prussian armour-clad, and hence first non-sail vessel, *Arminius*, was launched in London; and in July 1867 she bought her first twin-screw armour-clad (*Friedrich Carl*) from France. Of major consequence, however, was the fact that in March 1865 Prussia acquired Kiel, destined to become her major naval station in the Baltic Sea and in November 1866 the site of her Navy School.

However, in 1865, the year that Tirpitz entered the Navy, the Prussian Landtag (regional parliament) rejected the government's request for twenty armoured ships and an annual budget of 5 million thalers. The armour-clad *König Wilhelm*, launched in April 1868, was to remain Germany's largest warship, with 9,754 tons displacement, until 1891. This dismal picture was brightened only by the official opening of Wilhelmshaven harbour in June 1869 by King Wilhelm I (1861-88).

The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) completed the unification of Germany and laid the permanent basis for the glory of her Army and especially her *Generalstab* under Field-Marshal Helmuth v.

Moltke. The war at sea was conspicuous by its absence. Already in the struggle with Austria in 1866 the Navy had contributed no significant deeds, and the seizure of Hanover's fortifications on the Elbe and Weser rivers by Prussian monitors had not affected the outcome of the war in the least. In 1870 a French fleet under Vice-Admiral Bouët-Willaumez quickly seized about forty German merchant ships, while another fleet under Vice-Admiral Fourichon blockaded the North Sea coast and particularly the new installations at Wilhelmshaven. There was, in fact, to be so little action at sea that the French crews were eventually put on shore for the defence of Paris. The creation of the German Empire on 18 January 1871 in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles was largely the work of the Prussian Army, reinforced by various German regional armies.

Article 53 of the constitution of both the North German Confederation in 1867 and the German Empire in 1871 recognized the independent status of the Navy; in 1871 the Navy was granted imperial status.

Perhaps because its role in the wars of German unification had been only minimal, the Navy from 1872 until 1888 was commanded by Army officers. The first of these, Albrechtorn Stosch, instilled the junior service with Prussian military *esprit de corps*, and transferred to it the drill and regulations of the Prussian Army. The general assigned the Navy primarily coastal defence functions, once describing it as a "living coastal defence". His tactics for war at sea were the same as for infantry, with the principal opponent being France, and later a possible Franco-Russian combination. Stosch hoped that his force could prevent an enemy landing on German soil and, if possible, safeguard German coastal cities from enemy shelling. There were, on the positive side, several reforms and innovations launched by Stosch that were to have a permanent effect. In 1872 he transformed the Ministry of Marine into the Imperial Admiralty, and three years later he partly camouflaged his Army origins by receiving the rank of admiral. In March 1872 Stosch created the Navy Academy at Kiel for the future intellectual development of especially able officers. This was followed in May 1872 by the formation of a "Machine Engineer Corps" and in February 1873 by the grant to the Medical Corps of Officers of equal status with Army and Navy officers. In July 1879 Stosch introduced the "Torpedo Engineer Corps" entrusted with the maintenance and operation of torpedoes and mines.

Stosch's tenure of office also witnessed a large-scale revamping

of the antiquated Royal Prussian Navy – now the Imperial German Navy. In May 1872 he laid down a ten-year building plan calling for the construction of 8 armoured frigates, 6 armoured corvettes, 7 monitors, 2 floating batteries, 20 light corvettes, 6 avisos, 18 gunboats, and 28 torpedo-boats – at a projected cost of 218,437,500 Goldmarks (GM).<sup>\*</sup> It was a major building programme and surprisingly received approval in the Reichstag, perhaps because a quarter of the money was provided from the French indemnity of 1870–1.

Between 1874 and 1876, the four ships of the *Sachsen* class were laid down: *Bayern*, *Baden*, *Sachsen*, and *Württemberg*. They were 7,500-ton armoured frigates with six 26 cm, six 8.7 cm and eight 8.8 cm steel guns; in 1886 they received three 35 cm torpedo tubes. A smaller vessel, *Oldenburg*, was ordered in 1883.

When Stosch left office in 1883 – according to Tirpitz, because of his inability to get along with Bismarck – he left behind a fleet consisting of 7 armoured frigates and 4 armoured corvettes, the first tactically unified group of German warships, and personnel consisting of 423 officers and 5,062 ratings.

His successor, Leo Graf v. Caprivi, was an Army general obsessed with the notion of a war on two fronts, against France and Russia, and he spent his term in office developing elaborate coastal defence plans. These centred especially upon the deployment of shallow-draught monitors as well as torpedoes and mines. The German Navy had in 1882 purchased several Whitehead torpedoes; this special weapon was later to be developed in the Reich by the Schwartzkopf firm in Berlin. General v. Caprivi's penchant for torpedoes led, in turn, to the development of torpedo-boats (and not destroyers), which had first been built in Germany in the autumn of 1871. Caprivi hoped that these relatively inexpensive and yet purely aggressive vessels might accord a second-rate naval power a chance against superior surface fleets. In order to oversee the development of the torpedo-boats, Caprivi in March 1886 created a special "Inspection of Torpedo Development" in Kiel; in October 1887 he followed this up with the formation of the First Torpedo Division in Wilhelmshaven and the Second Torpedo Division in Kiel. Only in 1887 did Caprivi ask for the construction of ten armoured frigates, wishing to conserve "every man and every penny" for the expected land war. Finally, Caprivi also had a hand in expanding

<sup>\*</sup>One pound sterling was worth about 20 GM. See Abbreviations and Conversions, p. xiv.

German canal facilities: in June 1887 he attended the cornerstone laying for the projected North Sea–Baltic Sea (Kaiser-Wilhelm) Canal by Kaiser Wilhelm I, completed in June 1895. Caprivi left the Navy in 1888 with a complement of 534 executive officers (*Seeoffiziere*) and a total strength of 15,480 men. The fleet consisted of 18 armour-clads, and 8 large and 10 small cruising ships.

But the Caprivi years had raised a troublesome issue that was not resolved until 1898. Europe's reliance upon ships of the line was severely challenged in the 1870s and 1880s by the writings of the French *jeune école* (young school) of Admiral Théophile Aube. The latter argued rather forcefully and convincingly at first that torpedo-boats were the main weapon with which secondary naval powers could hope to neutralize the British battleship superiority. Aube later refined his thought along the lines of *guerre de course*, that is, of the need to build cruisers with which to interdict Britain's immense merchant fleet and thereby to deprive her of the requisite imports. At a still later point the submarine was to become a major weapon in the arsenal of minor naval powers against first-class maritime nations. Alfred Tirpitz ironically was initially (1877–88) an ardent advocate of torpedo-boats, of the "black host" as his T-boats came to be known.

The counter-argument of *la vieille école* (the old school) revolved round the battleship as the locus of the battle fleet, and in 1890 it received a tremendous boost with the publication of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*. Mahan argued that a concentration of naval force in battle fleets decided control of vital sea lanes; that large-scale blockades and not cruiser warfare were decisive; that overseas colonies were vital to a nation's prosperity; that naval bases (*Stützpunkte*) were more valuable than control of large land areas; and that sea power alone guaranteed the rise of a nation to world stature.

These great debates were carried out in Germany in theory only, by a small handful of naval officers, owing to her lack of sea power. Moreover, throughout the 1880s and 1890s no central organization to direct naval enthusiasm into official channels existed. The Conservatives and Socialists, though for very different reasons, steadfastly opposed costly naval expenditure, and the Catholic Centre Party remained indifferent to the idea.

Bismarck, despite his brief flirtation with colonial – and hence naval – matters in 1884 at the zenith of his *rapprochement* attempts with France, wanted Germany to remain "a sea power of the

second rank", and especially among Army officers there existed little enthusiasm for the Navy, pejoratively referred to as "the Army's satellite". Field-Marshal Freiherr v. Manteuffel in 1883 summed up the prevailing attitude in Prussian Army circles in a letter to the Chief of the Military Cabinet, General v. Albedyll: "I, too, belong to the uncultured supporters of the politics of King F[riedrich] W[ilhelm] I, who sold his last warship in order to create one more battalion." This situation was to change dramatically on 15 June 1888 when Wilhelm II became German Emperor and King of Prussia after the sudden death of his father Friedrich III, Kaiser and King for only ninety-nine days.

## II

# Kaiser Wilhelm II

*The Years of Hope  
and Misdirection, 1888—1898*

The last of the Hohenzollerns brought to the throne an active interest in naval affairs. Youthful memories of Kiel and Portsmouth, readings in naval history, recollections of British naval reviews, visits to the regattas at Cowes, and Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, which he read in 1894 and wanted to memorize, helped shape the young Kaiser's outlook. In 1895 he proudly exhibited his painting "Sea Battle", depicting the attack of a torpedo-boat flotilla upon a squadron of ironclads. When he dismissed Bismarck in March 1890, Wilhelm cabled the Grand Duke of Sachsen-Weimar: "The position of Officer of the Watch of the Ship of State has come to me. . . . Full steam ahead." On 1 January 1900, in an address to the officers of the Berlin garrison commemorating the dawn of a new century, Wilhelm gave perhaps the clearest indication of the role that naval affairs were to assume during his reign:

And as My grandfather [did] for the Army, so I will, for My Navy, carry on unerringly and in similar manner the work of reorganization so that it may also stand on an equal footing with My armed forces on land and so that through it the German Empire may also be in a position abroad to attain that place which it has not yet reached.

Wilhelm was constantly concerned about the historical image that he hoped to realize. He informed Chancellor Chlodwig Fürst zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst in 1899 concerning naval expansion: "In this question there is for Me no turning back, just as [it had



been] for My honourable grandfather in the question of the Army reorganization." There could hardly be a clearer exposition of this preconceived historical parallel: Wilhelm I had raised Prussia/Germany to great-power status with an army that was responsible solely to him; Wilhelm II desired to raise Germany to world-power status (*Weltmacht*, a term that he first used publicly on 18 January 1896) with a navy completely dependent upon him.

The Kaiser was so carried away with his maritime mission that history was often the victim of gross misconceptions. The Hanseatic League and the Great Elector were singled out for repeated praise; Charlemagne and the Emperor Heinrich VI (1189-97) were depicted as great "universal monarchs" on land as well as at sea; and in February 1897, in perhaps his single most damning domestic speech, Wilhelm claimed that Bismarck and Moltke ("pygmies") had merely been "tools" (*Handlanger*) in the hands of his grandfather, now constantly referred to and celebrated as "Wilhelm the Great", "who in the Middle Ages would have been beatified".

Such nonsense, when it went without correction, merely encouraged Wilhelm's vision of his role as German Emperor and King of Prussia "by Grace of God". His public utterances soon became an embarrassment to the government. Phrases such as "We are the salt of the earth", "the trident belongs in our fist", "I am the *arbiter mundi*", and "the German empire has become a world empire", among many others, quickly made their way into the world press. Wilhelm soon came to be known as the "Fleet Kaiser".

In July 1900, at the launching of the battleship *Wittelsbach*, he advised the world: "No great decision may now be made without the German Empire and the German Emperor." Already as Crown Prince, Wilhelm had candidly informed his mother, the Empress Frederick, the former princess royal of Great Britain, that his rule would usher in a "New Course" in terms of kingship:

The Crown sends its rays through "Grace of God" into palaces as well as huts and – pardon me, if I dare say so – Europe and the world listens intently in order to hear "what says and thinks the German Emperor?," and not, what is the will of his chancellor! . . . For ever and ever there will only be one true Emperor in the world, and that is the German Kaiser, without regard for his person or his traits, alone by right of a thousand-year tradition and his chancellor has to obey!



1. The Kaiser instructs his workmen at Kiel during the First World War. Wilhelm II is in the centre of the picture; his royal brother Admiral Prince Heinrich is on the far right



2a. A rare glimpse of Admiral Prince Heinrich (second from left) and Admiral v. Tirpitz (third from left) in civilian dress at the Royal Yacht Club, Queenstown, c. 1900



2b. Germany's naval leaders in the First World War. Front row, from left to right: Admiral Reinhard Scheer, fleet commander, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Admiral Henning v. Holtzendorff, Chief of the Admiralty Staff, and Admiral Georg Alexander v. Müller, Chief of the Navy Cabinet