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What Does Tirpitz's Naval Programme Reveal About the Political Culture of the Kaiserreich?

Salvatore Coppola¹

Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's naval programme reveals a number of underlying features which are unique aspects of the political culture of the *Kaisereich*; both in the domestic and international contexts. The naval arms-race against Great Britain was an event that resulted from the interaction of a number of goals that Tirpitz had initially envisaged for Germany and Kaiser William II. Yet, the pursuit of an ever-greater navy fleet was by no means a monopoly of the Germans but, on the contrary, it was a common trait of every major European Power of the time, from Britain to Austria, to Russia. Nevertheless, the scale to which Tirpitz went deserves a particular emphasis in that it was not *only* a *military* programme, but rather, its aims were directed towards the achievement of objectives in a number of fields: *economic* growth, domestic *socio-political* stability, and German Imperialism through *Weltpolitik*, which reflected the contemporary political issues present within the Kaiserreich. These three aspects will be explored with further emphasis on the *structural* aspects of the Wilhelmine system of government together with the *individuals* that were involved in German policymaking at the time. It will therefore be possible to observe how these various features were crucial in determining Germany's political system. This, in turn, allowed Tirpitz's radical and militaristic plan to take place. The Tirpitz Plan reveals its objectives as being not solely restricted to the military-naval domain. Furthermore, one will see how the Tirpitz plan could have taken place only in Germany during the Kaiserreich thanks to the uniquely ambiguous administrative structures Germany possessed.

In the socio-political sphere the Tirpitz Plan had the far reaching aspiration of transforming Germany into a nation-state. This goal reveals the dramatic sense of disunity that the German lands were experiencing, even within the parliamentarians in the Reichstag. Freiherr von Hodenberg, leader of the Hanoverians, states that: "...the term 'Kaiser' was sheer romantic nonsense. The Hohenzollerns were 'Kings of Prussia' and words like 'Reich', 'Nation' and 'Deutschland' were as distasteful as they were radical."² The Tirpitz plan aimed at using the navy to eliminate the idea that Holstein once underlined as being the fact that: "Germany...is not a block but a mosaic of tribes."³ The fleet's capacity to be used as a symbol of national unity was derived from the fact that it was

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² Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, (London: Macdonald, 1965), pp. 33-34.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

German and not Prussian; as the army had once been. The fleet breached the army tradition of social hierarchy in that the officer corps was open to members of the Liberal middle-class. The fact that academics also began to become interested in *navalism* at the time suggested that the navy was a truly national and dynamic corps, unlike the army that appeared to remain an appendix of absolutist rule. The use of the navy as a façade for national unity and equality was an ingenious instrument for the self preservation of the Kaiserreich system. As Berghahn underlines: “Men like Tirpitz and Bulow were among the first to recognise the usefulness of naval armaments as an instrument of distraction and social integration.”⁴ This ideal of ‘patriotic-galvanising’ had the dual mission of uniting the Germans and countering the spread of Liberalism. It was believed that the fleet would have been particularly useful in bestowing sentimental and material goods onto the working class, and by so doing, keeping them away from social democratic ideals; particularly from the SPD.⁵ The fact that the navy was *per se* composed of members of Liberal circles was seen as a way to institutionalize the idea that an agency of the state could somehow link social democracy to the Kaiserreich; unofficially legitimising Germany’s anti-democratic ruling system to the eyes of its domestic public opinion. Berghahn further outlines this by stating: “...the whole concept of a navy under the exclusive command of the Kaiser is yet another manifestation of the keen desire of William II and his advisers to maintain and, where possible, strengthen the existing quasi-absolutist political system against parliamentary currents in German society.”⁶

The tensions that sparked in society had repercussions in Parliament as well. Tirpitz designed his programme to remove the budgetary powers from the popular assembly. This was to prevent a possible oppositional majority in the Reichstag from obstructing the navy’s finances. This ambiguity derived from the joint Kaiser and Parliament⁷ control of the navy; the Kaiser always had the last word, but simultaneously, the navy depended on the Reichstag for consenting to its budgetary requirements. This constitutional-flaw had influenced the military ever since the Constitutional Conflict of the 1860s. Thus, Tirpitz sought to solve the conflict once and for all within his new plan; “...the navy had to be withdrawn to an extra-constitutional position in which the monarch could dispose of the organisation, size and use of the fleet as he alone saw fit...Tirpitz therefore also set out to establish an Iron Budget (*Marineaeternat*).”⁸ This feature secured the

⁴ V.R.Berghahn. Germany and the Approach of War in 1914, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), p.29.

⁵ V.R.Berghahn. Germany and the Approach of War in 1914, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), pp.29-30.

⁶ V.R.Berghahn. “*Naval Armaments and Social Crisis: Germany Before 1914*”, in G.Best & A.Wheatcroft (eds.), War, Economy and the Military Mind, (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p.66.

⁷ Although such control was only limited to voting the expenditure bills requested by the government.

⁸ V.R.Berghahn. “*Naval Armaments and Social Crisis: Germany Before 1914*”, in G.Best & A.Wheatcroft (eds.), War, Economy and the Military Mind, (London: Croom Helm,1976). p. 66.

Kaiser with the automatic replacing of obsolete ships, and thus, prevented the Reichstag from further influence on navy expenditure.

Due to the close relationship between the German social hierarchy and its politics led the Minister of Marine to seek for further domestic stability by influencing the Country's *economy*. In this respect the Tirpitz plan attempted to stabilize the relationship between the two main conflicting classes; the landed aristocracy and the industrial bourgeois. For years historians have forwarded the notion that the navy was somehow a 'prize' for the bourgeois who could thus pursue new markets abroad, as well as receiving incentives to heavy industry through the commissioning of new ships. By doing so, it was believed, German economy would develop a field in which investors could 'distract' themselves. In exchange for these new possibilities of investment the bourgeois would close an eye on the absolutist structure that the Second Reich still possessed, and simultaneously, agree to place tariffs on foreign grain imports. These tariffs would consequently preserve the wealth of the agrarian Junkers whose economy had previously been in decline.⁹ Although many studies have done much to undermine this concept, this idea of possible mutual favouritism *cannot* be truly neglected. In a period of intensified industrialisation it is recognised that the Kaiserreich needed to secure foreign markets for economic expansion. The fleet was a 'modern' instrument of policy, and as such, was seen by many as a means, provided by the state, to achieve further economic growth. As Eckart Kehr stated: "The fleet was a component of the capitalist profit economy, while the army could at best be viewed as a support for subsistence economy."¹⁰ In this age of economic development Germany, and especially Tirpitz, felt that the navy would become an instrument for defending the national economy. "Given the nature of international competition in an age of industrial capitalism, navies were necessary to prepare for the probability of war between competing national economies."¹¹

These two fields concerning domestic policy must not confuse one's understanding of the fact that Tirpitz, as an admiral of the navy, did indeed hope to obtain a strong fleet to defend and, consequently, possess the capability to pursue a militarily-active foreign policy. One of the most significant characteristics of German Wilhelmine politics was the abandoning of Bismarck's idea of consolidating Germany into a *continental* power. The Kaiser's expansionist dreams met with the belief that by pursuing a world-wide Imperialist *Weltpolitik* they could likewise secure domestic unity. German commitment to attaining a 'place in the sun' by investing massive military resources

⁹ As a consequence of foreign (cheaper) imports; especially from Russia.

¹⁰ Eckart Kehr, "*The German Fleet in the Eighteen Nineties and the Politico-Military Dualism in Empire*", in *Economic Interest, Militarism, and Foreign Policy: Essays on German History*, (London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 8.

¹¹ Rolph Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, The Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan 1875-1914*, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 323.

into fleet-building inevitably led to tensions with the only major sea hegemon: Britain. Yet, Tirpitz and the Kaiser believed that tension was necessary if they wished to achieve the status of a 'world' power. Weltpolitik hence relied heavily on causing fear in potential opponents that, in a society in which notions of courage, heroism, and honour reigned supreme, was a risk that the German government was willing to accept if glory was to be gained. The naval programme envisioned a massive fleet; "Since the [other countries]...were not expected to cede their colonial possessions voluntarily, they had to be bullied into surrendering them."¹² Some historians, on the other hand, have suggested the idea that the Tirpitz programme was not so much a weapon as a political instrument to acquire security for the German state against foreign aggression. As Hewitson states: "...it is likely that Tirpitz envisaged the German navy largely as a deterrent to be deployed in a policy of brinkmanship."¹³ The idea that Weltpolitik, via a strong Imperial fleet, could achieve political equality for Germany with the other powers was a major objective of the Kaiserreich that, also in Tirpitz's mind, believed Germany should be recognised the status of 'world' power (even if it had been united for only thirty-years). "The navy... was to be a lever with which Britain would be forced to respect Germany."¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is of relative importance whether or not the Kaiser was ready to use his beloved fleet in a war against his neighbours but, what is indeed significant, is the fact that the Tirpitz plan unveiled the Kaiserreich's political aspirations of becoming an economic and military Empire with the potential to spread to any continent it wished to. The Tirpitz plan was a catalyst to transform Weltpolitik from an objective to be pursued, to one that could be imposed on the other colonial empires.

The Tirpitz plan was, to a great extent, the product of Tirpitz's personal illusion. After having seen the main fields in which this plan was designed to bring success it is important to understand how such a plan was allowed to take place, and thus, how the Reich's political system allowed this programme to be pursued for so many years.

The main answer to this must be researched in the *political structure* of the Second Reich. The military and civilian spheres, in fact, operated as independent agencies; causing confusion and tension between each other. Ever since 1871 this issue had failed to be addressed and, as a consequence, this became a serious problem when the civilian authority, unlike in the Bismarckian Era, was unable to restrain the personal aspirations of the high officials of the military(navy) staff. As Steinberg claimed: "The pomp and splendour of Bismarck's Reich concealed what has been

¹² V.R.Berghahn. "Naval Armaments and Social Crisis: Germany Before 1914", in G.Best & A.Wheatcroft (eds.), War, Economy and the Military Mind, (London: Croom Helm,1976), p. 67.

¹³ Mark Hewitson, Germany and the Causes of the First World War, (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p.154.

¹⁴ Peter Pulzer, Germany 1870-1945, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 73.

rightly called an “inner fragility”.¹⁵ In the last years of the 1800s this fragility came to favour the Navy (Tirpitz) that, backed by an unwise King, was mistakenly allowed to pursue an objective without possessing the knowledge of what sort of political implications those actions had on Germany. Kehr stigmatizes this ambiguous relationship between officers and politicians in that: “...the whole system of government...gradually evolved in the direction of a fundamental emancipation of the military domain from parliament and nation as a whole.”¹⁶ The Kaiserreich system therefore was allowing the military to subjugate the civilian authorities which, for their part, were either blinded by the illusion Tirpitz had ‘sold’ to the Country (through the aid of propaganda), or, amongst those who realised the diplomatic implications that the Tirpitz plan had, were incapacitated to act thanks to the King’s ‘naval-hysteria’ and the political system’s inability to allow the government intrusion in military affairs. The Navy was a subject exclusive to Tirpitz and William II. The bureaucratic apparatus of *attachès* was also unable to aid the civilian government in preventing German alienation from all potential allies. Steinberg, referring to the influence of the military *attachès* on the King, stated that: “...the civilian governments could not control them, because in Prussian tradition no civilian could stand between a Prussian officer and his supreme War Lord.”¹⁷ No public official, including the Chancellor himself, was able to persuade/oblige the Kaiser to prevent the Tirpitz plan from harming Germany’s position abroad and exhausting precious funds that could serve in other, more productive, enterprises. For Berghahn the: “...naval armaments became a divisive force which contributed to the diplomatic isolation of Germany.”¹⁸ The Navy, and the military in general, were incapable of carrying out diplomacy. As a consequence, they were only able to plan actions in the event of measures which would somehow require the resort to force. The Kaiserreich’s resulting image was that of a state that pursued expansionist/aggressive policies without even attempting to mediate or redress their foreign policy under more amicable terms. Berghahn highlighted how this occurred for the Kaiser’s Imperial aspirations: “The Kaiser’s Weltpolitik and Sammlungspolitik had antagonised them[other countries], or at least made them suspicious of the aims of the unstable and restless nation in the centre of Europe.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, (London: Macdonald, 1965), p.32.

¹⁶ Eckart Kehr, “*The German Fleet in the Eighteen Nineties and the Politico-Military Dualism in Empire*”, in *Economic Interest, Militarism, and Foreign Policy: Essays on German History*, (London: University of California Press, 1977), p.4.

¹⁷ Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, (London: Macdonald, 1965), p.55.

¹⁸ V.R.Berghahn. “*Naval Armaments and Social Crisis: Germany Before 1914*”, in G.Best & A.Wheatcroft (eds.), *War, Economy and the Military Mind*, (London: Coom Helm,1976), p.71.

¹⁹ V.R.Berghahn. *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976),, p. 42.

The structural deficiencies outlined above went hand in hand with the individual characters that headed Germany in 1898. It is in fact the *individuals* involved in the government that enabled the structural flaws of the Kaiserreich to have such negative influence on foreign relations with other states between 1898 and 1914. The Tirpitz plan revealed the Kaiserreich's sudden shift towards a militarist/aggressive political culture. Yet, much can be said to argue that it was simply the natural consequence of the absence of a figure like *Otto von Bismarck* that, for the thirty years in which he was in power, had been able to subjugate the military as an instrument of the civilian government. Some suggest that the presence of a Bismarck-like figure would have prevented the military from gaining the upper hand. As Gordon Craig points out: "The difficulties experienced by Bismarck in enforcing military subordination to civil authority during the wars of 1864, 1866, and 1870 are well known."²⁰ During the Bismarck Era the army had already proven its 'independence' by *attempting* to urge (in secret) Austria in 1887 to declare war on Russia.²¹ The Tirpitz plan was yet another manifestation of a similar trait; a state agency (the Navy) acting autonomously regardless of the opinion of the rest of government, or of the diplomatic implications of its actions. The diplomatic suicide of the Tirpitz plan owes much of its success to the Reich's ruler: Kaiser Wilhelm II. Ironically, it was he who ruled supreme over the Kaiserreich that was, in the end, its weakest link. Without the presence of a strong chancellor to subjugate the independent army and navy to civilian authority meant that the only overarching figure within the Wilhelmine political system was William II. Yet, King William's personality was by no means congenial to the responsibilities which were required of him. His semi-infantile behaviour subjugated him to the will of his most persuasive advisors. His personal enthusiasm for the Navy was vital in assuring the State's commitment to the naval programme. "If it had not been for the 'naval passion' of Wilhelm II, it is likely that fleet construction would have been less expansive."²² The Kaiser's obsession with the 'luxury' of a personal fleet verged on the pathological, and as Pulzer puts it: "No project was dearer to Wilhelm's heart: it satisfied his need (in Bismarck's phrase) 'to celebrate his birthday every day'."²³ Wilhelm's subjugation to Tirpitz's vision was ill-replaced and aggravated by the persistence with which the naval programme was pursued against all odds and at the stake of other important reform programmes that were ignored. The Kaiserreich's weakness lay ultimately in the weakness of the Kaiser himself; incapable of adapting to the situation as things changed. His incapacity to use the same Realpolitik as Bismarck did, and his fixation with Imperialist claims, all

²⁰ Gordon Craig, Germany 1866-1945, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.315.

²¹ Ibid., p. 315.

²² Rolph Hobson, Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, The Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan 1875-1914, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 305.

²³ Peter Pulzer, Germany 1870-1945, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 73.

contributed to his final downfall. “It is hard to imagine”, Hobson comments, “that Tirpitz could have become the longest-lived minister of marine of any state....if he had not been protected against political buffeting by Wilhelm’s unwavering support.”²⁴ If the situation was bad as it was, Wilhelm managed to undermine his position further by authorizing conflicting bills and being influenced by whatever had been told to him most recently.²⁵ Unfortunately incoherence was yet another characteristics of the Kaiser that made him unfit to cover the role he was born into. Unfortunately for Germany, King William’s lust for personal gratification often outstod the interests of the state. The figure that took advantage of the Reich’s political system was Admiral Tirpitz himself. By envisaging an ideal that would encompass his naval education with both domestic and foreign policy goals, he aptly constructed a plan that guaranteed Kaiser and Reichstag support, as well as a career for himself. The individual strength of Tirpitz’s character enabled him to take advantage of a weak chancellery as well as an easily-persuaded, belligerent, self-gratifying King. The interaction of the strong character of Tirpitz and the inability of the civilian authorities to buttress his relationship with the King allowed him to erect himself on the pedestal of his personally-forged fleet.

Overall it is possible to make some important considerations regarding the political culture of the Kaiserreich by observing what took place under the Tirpitz programme. However inefficient the plan was, it is an astonishing fact that, Tirpitz alone, was able to forge a naval programme and mould it into German policy for more than a decade. This instance shows how weak and susceptible the Wilhelmine political system was to strong personalities like that of Tirpitz or, as had been in previous decades, of Bismarck. The lack of a system of policy verification enabled Tirpitz to construct his twenty-year-long career which nevertheless handicapped the German finances throughout the years prior to the First World War. As we have seen, the Tirpitz plan possessed socio-political, economic, and Imperialist objectives which outlined the mutating domestic socio-economic structures that were affecting the Kaiserreich’s political stability. To preserve the Reich’s ‘out-dated’ absolutism it had to find a means to rehabilitate itself at the eyes of a population that was increasingly tinged with notions of Social Democracy and Liberalism. The Navy appeared to solve such a clash by giving the Crown and the Liberals a common goal. Liberal enthusiasm together with the Crown’s keenness towards Weltpolitik united the Reichstag, but nevertheless, had a negative impact of Germany’s continental army. In this respect Hobson’s views the Reich system’s flaws as: “The combination of the preference of a semi-absolutist monarch, an able

²⁴ Rolph Hobson, Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, The Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan 1875-1914, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 305.

²⁵ Jonathan Steinberg, Yesterday’s Deterrent, (London: Macdonald, 1965), p. 52.

minister of marine, and bourgeois nationalism [that] skewed defence spending in favour of the navy.”²⁶ The Kaiser’s susceptibility to change, according to who he was advised by, directly affected state policy. Prussia-Germany had always been a continental power, and yet suddenly, on the dawn of the 20th Century, Germany set out to antagonise the World’s greatest fleet regardless of the fact that the German Navy was less than forty-years-old.

In conclusion the political culture of the Kaiserreich might be seen as one of misunderstanding. The continual resort to antagonism in foreign relations was a result of the weak structure that, by 1900, favoured the military over the civilian authorities. These ‘new’ leaders were unable to grasp the position from which they mediated by regarding everyone as a potential foe. Their misconception of Britain’s strength dragged Germany into an arms-race it could never win. “The German ‘heroes’ flatly underestimated the political system across the North Sea [Britain] and never understood the despised ‘shopkeepers’.”²⁷ On the continent, they transformed their fears of encirclement into a self-fulfilling-prophecy. The pursuit of unfriendly militaristic programs like the Tirpitz plan, or in the case of Schlieffen’s plan for a two-front war, indicated the Kaiserreich’s incapacity to pursue a policy of diplomatic relations based on peaceful alliances. The aggressive nature born from the inefficient political culture of the Kaiserreich earned Germany its negative reputation of a ‘warring nation’. To the eyes of the world German reputation became that of, as Cramer puts it; a nation in which “...war constituted the core of German history and...the disease of ‘militarism’ [that] was a peculiarly German deformation of national psyche.”²⁸ The Reich’s administrative ambiguities favoured hostile policies that led the political culture to follow suit; blinded by the mirage of grandeur that Tirpitz was able to construct. The few who opposed the Tirpitz’s naval programme were neutralised by the organizational apparatus of the German state. The interaction of all these features and deficiencies placed, in the 1900 context, Germany into a state of isolation that would reveal itself fatal once the First World War broke out in 1914.

²⁶ Rolph Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, The Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan 1875-1914*, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p.25.

²⁷ V.R.Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), p.71.

²⁸ Kevin Cramer, “A World of Enemies: New Perspectives of German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War”, in *Central European History*, n.39, (Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association, 2006), p.271.

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