

Bismarck, Wilhelm II., and German Military Leadership

Michael Epkenhans

I

At least twice in the history of Imperial Germany, December seems to have been a rather critical month:

On 17 December 1887, the ageing German Emperor, Wilhelm I, convened his military entourage at his bed in the castle of Berlin to listen to the reports of his generals about the military situation of the Empire. Under normal circumstances, these reports by Germany's highest-ranking generals, the Chief of Staff and his Quarter Master General, the Prussian Minister of War, and the chief of the Military Cabinet were by no means unusual. Against the background of a political situation which seemed to be deteriorating for several years now, this meeting, however, turned out to be a war-council. For many months the Quarter Master General of the Prussian Army, General v. Waldersee had been pleading for a preventive war against Russia. Germany's eastern neighbour had been quarreling with the nation's most reliable ally, Austria-Hungary, over the Balkans for more than two years now, and according to secret reports about the redeployment of troops on its western border seemed to prepare for a war against the powers of the dual alliance. From a military point of view a solution to this problem seemed urgent, not the least because of the hostile attitude of Germany's western neighbour, France. Waldersee's plea for war was supported by the 87-year-old Chief of

the General Staff, Moltke the Elder, and Prince William, whose influence had become ever more important due to his father's fatal illness.¹

Given the authority of the elder Moltke and the fact the ageing Emperor still felt as a soldier by heart, it was hardly astonishing that the latter, though rather reluctantly, agreed to Moltke's proposals to prepare for a war in the following year. In a moving letter the Emperor informed his son about the results of this "war council", while other participants began to accelerate preparations to enforce this decision.

Almost exactly 25 years later, history seemed to repeat itself. On 8 December 1912, a Sunday morning, Wilhelm, who had been a young prince at that time, and who was now the nation's supreme war-lord, ordered the members of his military entourage to immediately join him in order to keep a "war-council". As in 1887, Germany's international position seemed deteriorating again. Embarrassed by a report from the German ambassador in London warning him that Lord Haldane had told him that Britain would not remain neutral in a Franco-German war, Wilhelm II thought that the iron ring around Germany was finally closing and that measures had to be taken quickly to break it. Hardly astonishing, the Emperor's principal military advisor, the Chief of the General Staff, Moltke the Younger, pleaded for war, "the sooner the better". Only grudgingly, the latter accepted Tirpitz's request of postponing this war for another one and a half years. Then, the secretary of the Imperial Navy Office argued, the navy would eventually be ready as well.

As we all know, there was no war in 1888, and whether the outbreak of war in July 1914 was a direct result of the Emperor's war-council of 1912 is still a matter of debate among historians.

Nevertheless, what is striking and very unusual in comparison with at least western European "standards" is the fact that, first of all, "war-councils" like these were still held at all in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and, secondly, that they were held without inviting those responsible for German politics in general and

¹ Cf. John C.G. Röhl, *Young Wilhelm*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 599-629, 741-759, and also for a general survey: Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Sceptre*, vol. 1 and 2, London 1972, passim.

foreign policy in particular, namely the German Chancellors and their secretaries for foreign affairs.

At first sight, this neglect of politics by the Emperor and his military entourage seems to support the idea that Imperial Germany was indeed a military state in which the sword finally prevailed over the scepter. Although only members of the inner circle were informed about these war-councils, it is hardly astonishing that both contemporaries as well as historians were in fact of the opinion that the influence of the military was eventually responsible for all evils in German history, namely both a feudalized society and a pre-modern political system, the incredible respect of military values, and the subsequent rise of national socialism.

Why did these critics think so, and, moreover, were they right, or at least, to what extent were they right?

II

The German army, or, to be more precise, the Prussian army had been a myth since the early 18th century, for it had decisively helped to make Prussia, a rather poor and small country in mid-eastern Europe, one of the five members of the Concert of Europe. The Wars of the French Revolution and the humiliating defeats the Prussians suffered from the French Emperor had shattered this view for some time. Nevertheless, in 1815, as a result of an era of far-reaching social, economic, and military reforms, Prussia had victoriously regained its great power status.

However, after Napoleon had been beaten, all efforts to continue the work which had only just begun, soon met with fierce resistance from the former ruling elites. As a result, Prussia did not become a constitutional monarchy. Hardly astonishing, many attempts were also made to stop the modernization of the army. It finally took another 30 years and a revolution to turn Prussia into a constitutional monarchy. Though the revolution was a failure in many respects, this was indeed an important step forward. For the newly established Prussian Parliament, the Abgeordnetenhaus, had to be asked before new taxes were levied or new laws passed.

Because of the growing demand of modern governments for money these rights soon became a lever to extend the limited powers of parliament and increase its influence on the government. The well-known bone of contention was the latter's intention to reorganize the army at the beginning of the 1860s. Unwilling to surrender his old-fashioned right of command, the Prussian King rejected any compromise. Instead, in September 1862, he finally appointed Bismarck prime minister, for the latter was willing to defend the traditional powers of the Prussian King in military affairs against the incursions of politicians even if this meant establishing some kind of veiled dictatorship. In order to achieve this aim, Bismarck did not hesitate to break the constitution, which, as he claimed, had been granted by the King and which, accordingly, the latter could change or even withdraw, if no compromise could be achieved between the government, appointed by the king and responsible only to him and parliament elected by the people. After five years this conflict was finally settled under the auspices of Prussia's victory against Austria and her allies in 1866. The result was a compromise to some extent, for Bismarck acknowledged the legislative powers of parliament; the latter in return, however, acknowledged the traditional powers of the King as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and, moreover, also gave their consent to a "septennat", a rule which exempted the army budget from political control for a seven-year-period. Thus parliament ceded one of its most important rights, the right to control finance, and, at least for the time being, it gave up any attempt at using the tax-question as a lever to push ahead parliamentary reforms in Germany. Moreover, the pre-modern command authority of the King had survived this conflict untouched, thus guaranteeing a sphere the liberal could not penetrate.

III

Against this background the question remains to be answered if and to what extent this "victory" over parliament – at least for the time being – did in fact strengthen the military which – at first sight - could rely on the confidence of the Prussian soldier-king to an extent that it was able to dominate politics.

These dreams which some of Prussia's generals may have dreamt did not come true, neither in the Bismarck-era nor in the Wilhelmine era, and their influence on both foreign as well as domestic policy remained limited.

With regard to foreign policy, Bismarck left no doubt that he was the main adviser of the king both in politics and, if need be, also in questions of strategy and tactics. In the war of 1866 as well as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 Bismarck repudiated all attempts at interfering with politics by the chief of the General Staff, the elder Moltke. In 1866, for example, Bismarck pleaded for a quick and acceptable peace with Austria which he regarded as a future ally within the Concert of Europe. Subsequently he refused all plans of humiliating Austria through a victory parade in Vienna or both territorial and financial demands.

Similarly, in 1870, when the Chief of the General Staff both rejected Bismarck's plan of a quick bombardment of Paris and even denied his right of being kept informed about the details of military planning, the King sided with Bismarck. At his own surprise, Moltke had to learn that his indignation and his spiteful suggestion that Bismarck be made responsible for directing the war, his insistence that the chief of staff be granted equality with the chancellor at least in wartime, led absolutely nowhere.

By and large and, perhaps, astonishingly enough, this pattern remained unchanged for almost twenty years with regard to German foreign policy. It is true, however, that the chief of the general staff was by no means content with the solution decreed by his supreme war-lord in 1870. The underlying reason for this almost continuous grumbling from Moltke's side was not that he aspired to establishing a military dictatorship of any kind. He was though still convinced that the conduct of a great war was a matter of military specialists and not inexperienced politicians. This deep-seated conviction was enhanced by his analysis of the course of German foreign policy, which he watched with almost constant concern. Though Germany was no doubt the strongest military power on the Continent in the late 19th century, its geographic situation in Central Europe was somewhat of a nightmare in case of war against either Russia or France alone, not to speak of an alliance between the two of them. From this followed that he worked out strategic war-plans which also dealt with the relationship between the political and military leadership in war-time. As early as 1871 he denied the primacy of politics in his memorandum "On Strategy", and in 1879,

he argued that the fields of both politics and military affairs were inseparable. Moreover, as the horizon seemed to darken, Moltke became an advocate of a preventive war, either against Russia or against France. In his opinion, which was shared by many of his fellow officers, a preventive war seemed to be the only solution to the disastrous effects of a long war on two fronts, which Germany was unable to win in spite of its military and economic strength.

Moltke's aim, namely to avoid a catastrophe, was shared by Bismarck, but his solution to this problem greatly differed from the latter's. Not war, but the preservation of peace through an intricate system of alliances seemed much more promising and less dangerous than Moltke's vague hope of a successful war in the east and, maybe, even in the west. It is true, Bismarck was deeply convinced that his foreign policy had to be supported by a strong army, and he was also unscrupulous in referring to the Empire's military strength in public speeches, but there is no evidence that he ever thought of really risking one after the wars of unification had been won.

So, when the military, as mentioned before, tried to persuade the ageing Emperor to prepare for a preventive in 1888, Bismarck was furious and threatened to resign from office. This was already enough to induce the Emperor to withdraw his consent to the war-plans put forward by his generals. Moreover, Bismarck now informed Moltke about the very secret reassurance treaty with Russia, which had been concluded only a few months before and which was supposed to keep the Russians neutral at least for several weeks in a future war. In the end, this convinced Moltke that it would be more prudent to avoid war than risking one, at least for the time being. This conviction was further enhanced by the fact that Moltke, who was 87 then, had begun to realize that a great war would now be of a totally different kind. As the Franco-Prussian War had already indicated, modern wars might be peoples' wars and last up to thirty years as he gloomily told Bismarck's son during the critical days in the last days of the year 1887. This prospect seemed even more dangerous in his eyes, since the nation's political leadership did not inspire confidence: The Emperor was a very old man, the crown prince a fatally ill man, and the latter's son nothing but a young officer of the royal hussars, as the chief of the General Staff sarcastically put it.

In the end Bismarck's authority and reputation, the Emperor's confidence into the latter's political skills, and, finally Moltke's willingness to succumb to their decisions saved Europe from a great war in the late 1880s.

III

Unfortunately, as one is inclined to say, the young officer of the King's hussars became Emperor only six months later. His premature accession to one of the most powerful thrones in Europe was to have severe repercussions on the relationship between the military, the chancellor, and the Emperor, because much more than his beloved grandfather, the new Emperor, Wilhelm II., was deeply convinced of his role both as head of state as well as supreme war-lord. Subsequently, the Kaiser, as he was commonly called, interfered with almost all aspects of domestic, foreign, and military policy.

As far as politics were concerned he took the next best occasion to dismiss Bismarck in order to establish his personal rule in 1890. With regard to military affairs, he soon streamlined the organization of the navy by following the example of the Prussian army. In 1889, the former powerful Admiralty was split up into a supreme naval command and the Imperial Navy Office, soon to be followed by the establishment of a new organization, the Naval Cabinet which was supposed to be his extra-constitutional means of controlling all matters dealing with questions of personnel.

Moreover, the Kaiser soon took an active interest in German foreign policy. In an era of rival imperialisms this meant, of course, the use of force, if necessary. The Kaiser as well as many contemporaries, it is true, was deeply convinced of this interrelationship. Though he enjoyed joining army manoeuvres and ordering more or less useless cavalry charges, his real "love" belonged to the navy for many years, and since the Kaiser's naval policy dominated German policy for more than a decade it seems justified to concentrate on this aspect to explain the nature of his relationship with his leading admirals and draw some conclusions which might lead further on.

Apart from his almost irrational love of ships and his deep-rooted social darwinistic convictions, the Kaiser had arrived at the conclusion in the early 1890s that only naval power seemed apt to make Germany a world power, which would

eventually succeed Britain. In Wilhelm's eyes, becoming a world power of equal status was now a 'dire' necessity, for a new reapportioning of the world seemed imminent: 'Old empires pass away and new ones are in the process of being formed', he told an astonished audience in October 1899.² To emphasize his concept of 'world policy' as well as his country's future position in the world, he exclaimed at the launching of the battleship *Wittelsbach* at Stettin that in his eyes world power status meant that 'in distant areas [beyond the ocean], no important decision should be taken without Germany and the German Kaiser.'³ This was, indeed, an ambitious aim, but what exactly it entailed remained rather vague throughout his reign.

In order to realize this dream, which, it is true, many contemporaries, who were also proud of their political, economic, and military achievements since the unification and who also felt that Imperial Germany was a vigorous young nation which, bursting at the seams in many ways, "collected" a number of young men around him, of whom Bernhard von Bülow and Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz were the most important ones. The two of them developed a coherent and almost ingenious concept of making Germany the world's supreme naval power by challenging Great Britain. The best means to achieve this aim was a Mahanian-like battle-fleet which was to be built up step by step in the next twenty years to come.

By performing this task the Emperor's new men like the Emperor himself moreover hoped to protect and enlarge Germany's colonial empire as well as the nation's economic wealth, industrial progress, and commerce. These aims in return were supposed to have a stabilizing impact upon the domestic situation in general.

So, why did this master plan go awry? This difficult question requires a much more complex answer than can be given here, but in this context two aspects should be emphasized here at least:

² Cf. the Emperor's speech in Hamburg, 18 October 1899, quoted in Ernst Johann (ed.), *Reden des Kaisers. Ansprachen, Predigten und Trinksprüche Wilhelms II.*, 2nd edn, Munich 1977, p. 83; cf. also Holger H. Herwig, 'Luxury' Fleet. The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918, London 1980, p. 19.

³ Cf. the speech of Wilhelm II in Wilhelmshaven, 3 July 1900, quoted in Johann (ed), *Reden des Kaisers*, p. 81.

Firstly, though the build-up of a powerful navy was fully in line with both contemporary politics and social darwinistic ideologies, this plan was neither based on a thorough analysis of Germany's geographic situation on the continent in case of war with Britain nor ever revised when both the international system began to change and, moreover, the money began to run out.

Secondly, to a great extent the Emperor himself soon proved an obstacle to his own plan. According to his own conception of a personal regime, the Kaiser tried to direct the course of both German naval policy and strategy. Although the first steps in this direction had already been taken at the beginning of his reign in 1888/89, he continued to strengthen his position by dissolving the High Command in 1899. The impact of this change was far-reaching. As Ivo Lambi has rightly summarized, from 1899, when he thus finally personally became commander-in-chief of the navy, 'a single erratic man had in his hands the final decisions of the Prussian and Imperial government, of the administration and command of both the army and the navy, and the coordination of this highly complex and unwieldy machinery.'⁴

The Chief of the Naval Cabinet, the Secretary of State of the Imperial Navy Office, the Chief of the Admiralty Staff as well as number of chiefs of different naval agencies were now not only directly responsible to him, but also had the right of direct access. Although the Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office was, at least according to the constitution, the Chancellor's subordinate, he could be by-passed and decisions made without his input which, in the worst case, seriously impeded the smooth working of the machinery of government and which could thus prove detrimental to both domestic and foreign policy. Normally, like their comrades of the army, the three most important naval officers reported to the Kaiser on Tuesdays or Saturdays respectively, unless they were ordered to report immediately, if something strange or important had occurred to the Kaiser. The topics they had to report on covered all questions of naval personnel, naval policy, and operational planning, however important or, often enough, trivial they might be.

⁴ Ivo N. Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862-1914*, Boston 1984, p. 167. It is true that Tirpitz thus tried to enhance his own position as Secretary of State of the Imperial Navy Office; nevertheless the Kaiser also hoped that the break-up of the High Command would strengthen his influence in naval affairs.

All questions regarding naval policy in general, as well as naval planning, naval construction, and civil-naval relations were discussed when the Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office reported to the Kaiser. The Chief of the Admiralty Staff in turn discussed all aspects of operational planning with the Kaiser. In order to emphasize further his authority as commander-in-chief the Kaiser regularly visited the navy's bases on the North Sea and Baltic coasts, embarked on its vessels for shorter or longer cruises, and, last but not least, took part in its annual manoeuvres using this opportunity to give 'advice' on naval strategy and tactics.

Though this somewhat bureaucratic procedure seemed to guarantee a rational and sound decision-making process, it soon proved one of the roots of disaster, because unfortunately the Kaiser proved unable to meet the requirements of this powerful position. It is true, as long as Wilhelm II, Bülow, and Tirpitz more or less fully agreed about the course of German domestic and foreign policy; there was no need to decide controversial issues of principal importance. On the contrary, the Emperor's discussions with his naval advisers, of which Tirpitz's annual report at Rominten, the Kaiser's hunting lodge in East Prussia was the most important one, and his regular meetings with his chancellor, Bülow, at first sight offer the picture of a harmonious and modern decision-making process. This picture was, however, only true as long as the Kaiser's Empire was steering in calm waters. As soon as his "ship" was hit by stormy weather, as it was the case in 1905/06, the governmental machinery stopped working smoothly. Bülow eventually realized that some steps had to be taken to adjust Germany's domestic and foreign policy to the existing situation.

For a number of reasons, this adjustment never materialized. On the contrary, somewhat ironically, the only and most important decision Wilhelm II did take was to dismiss Bülow in 1909. This dismissal was, however, less the result of far-reaching political differences, but of a lack of confidence in the Chancellor as a result of the latter's behaviour during the 'Daily-Telegraph-affair'.⁵

Nevertheless, Bülow's dismissal coincided with a serious crisis in domestic and foreign policy, caused to a great extent by Germany's embarkation on an offensive

⁵ See now Peter Winzen, *Das Kaiserreich am Abgrund. Die Daily-Telegraph-Affäre und das Hale-Interview von 1908*, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 19-91.

world and naval policy a decade earlier. According to his claim that he was the final arbiter, this situation would have required a thorough analysis of the existing situation as well as clear decisions about the country's future course by the Kaiser.

At first sight, some political observers in fact regarded the appointment of the new chancellor, former Home Secretary Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg who was totally inexperienced in foreign policy, as an indication that Wilhelm II was now obviously willing to be his own Foreign Secretary as well – and not only the nation's supreme war-lord.⁶ Their apprehensions were not justified, for the governmental machinery soon gave the impression of what many historians today call 'polycratic chaos'. As Tirpitz bitterly recalled in November 1912, since Bülow had 'deserted' him in 1908 for fear of a dramatic deterioration both of Anglo-German relations and of the financial situation of the Empire,⁷ the unity among Germany's leading 'world politicians' no longer existed. Instead, there was heavy in-fighting between the new Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, the Secretaries both for Foreign Affairs, Kiderlen-Wächter, and of the Treasury, Wermuth, on the one hand and Tirpitz on the other. Repeatedly reminded by Tirpitz that a failure of the envisaged naval build-up would mean a 'historic fiasco', Wilhelm II, at least for the time being, continued to support the Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office instead of initiating a thorough re-evaluation of German world policy.

Subsequently, the Chancellor's attempts at improving Anglo-German relations appeared half-hearted, for it was obvious to the British government that the support he received from the Kaiser was at best luke-warm. In 1911 and again in 1912, following the debacle of the second Moroccan crisis, Bethmann Hollweg, with the support of the Chief of the Great General Staff who was deeply concerned about the Empire's security on the continent, argued that a strengthening of the army was more important than new battleships.

The Kaiser, at first, had great difficulties in supporting the decision to concentrate efforts once again on the army. As the Empress, to whom Tirpitz had

⁶ See the letter of the designated Secretary for Foreign Affairs Kiderlen-Wächter to Kypke, 15 July 1909, in Ernst Jäckh (ed.), *Kiderlen-Wächter. Der Staatsmann und der Mensch. Briefwechsel und Nachlaß*, Stuttgart 1924, vol. 2, p.32.

⁷ Undated memorandum by Tirpitz, November 1912, BA-MA Tirpitz papers N 253/9.

appealed in despair,⁸ told Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in February 1912, her husband was allegedly on the verge of a nervous breakdown.⁹ It is not surprising that Tirpitz as well as even the Empress considered Wilhelm's often abrupt changes not only as an indication of increasing nervousness, but also as a proof that 'at the bottom of his heart the Kaiser regarded our bad relations with England as detestable.'¹⁰ Wilhelm II changed his opinion several times and, from Tirpitz's point of view, became increasingly 'unreliable'.¹¹ Moreover, the Kaiser not only shied away from important decisions in times of crisis. Often, he was also simply too lazy or much more interested in trivial matters like hunting to give more important decisions proper attention. For example, in 1913, after Tirpitz had travelled all the way from the Black Forest to East Prussia for his annual detailed report on naval affairs, the Kaiser immediately left the room only minutes after the Secretary of State had begun reporting, because a servant had informed him that a big stag had been sighted, instead of discussing Germany's future naval policy with Tirpitz.¹² On 29 July 1914, when war was imminent, the Chief of the Admiralty Staff could not give a report on his proposals for a naval war against Russia and France, because the Kaiser was too tired.¹³

Similarly, the organization of the navy remained 'chaotic' in spite of the Kaiser's position as commander-in-chief. During their visit to Kiel, British officers were, no doubt, impressed by the strength of the Imperial Navy. Fortunately, from their point of

⁸ Cf. the diary entry of Captain Hopman, 28 February 1912: 'Tirpitz tells me that the Empress has written to the Chancellor that he should eventually go all length (durchgreifen) in the interest of the Kaiser, who was melting away (zergehen) with unrest and excitement.' BA-MA Hopman papers N 326/9.

⁹ Cf. the diary entry of Captain Hopman, 12 March 1912, When Tirpitz told Hopman about the details of this intervention of the Empress with the Chancellor, he wrote: 'The whole story is unbelievable, but it is unfortunately true. We can now start to have doubts about Wilhelm's II state of mind. He is certainly a pathological case.' Ibid.

¹⁰ Diary entry of Captain Hopman, 9 September 1912, *ibid.* On 26 March 1912 the Empress had told Tirpitz: 'He [the Kaiser] is enthusiastic about England and everything which is English in his heart (er schwärme ja innerlich doch für England und englische Verhältnisse) that lies in his blood. She, however, has taken care that her sons would think differently. Ibid.

¹¹ For details see Michael Epkenhans, *Die wilhelminische Flottenrüstung. Weltmachtstreben, technischer Fortschritt, soziale Integration*, Munich 1991, pp. 93-137, 325-399.

¹² Cf. the diary entry of the Chief of the Naval Cabinet, Admiral von Müller, 27 September 1913, BA-MA Müller papers N 153/4.

¹³ Cf. the diary of the Chief of the Naval Cabinet, Admiral von Müller, 29 July 1914, BA-MA Müller papers N 153/5.

view, its 'administration appeared to be too decentralized to be entirely successful.'¹⁴ By and large this judgement was correct. Moreover, contrary to Tirpitz's hopes when he had urged the Kaiser to dissolve the powerful High Command in his own interest, decentralization did not put an end to heavy infighting between the navy's different agencies about strategy and tactics, and Tirpitz's building policy. Commanding admirals continued to accuse each other of interfering within their own respective spheres. For example, the 'front' almost continuously complained about both the lack of personnel, inferior weapons, and, moreover, a neglect of fighting efficiency. In return, the Imperial Navy Office accused the 'front' that it did not appreciate the enormous political and financial difficulties involved in carrying out the envisaged naval build-up. Rather than paying due attention to these rivalries and tensions, which increased greatly when Tirpitz's arch-enemy, Admiral Holtzendorff, became Commander-in-Chief of the High Seas Fleet in 1909, and trying to find a satisfactory solution to these problems, the Kaiser often simply erratically.

Hardly less disturbing were the Kaiser's erratic interventions in naval policy and strategy. Never fully convinced of Tirpitz's Mahanian-like strategic concept and its emphasis on battleships which were supposed to gain command of the sea after a decisive battle in the 'wet triangle' off Heligoland, Wilhelm II often tried to use his authority as commander-in-chief to change the former's carefully designed building-plan by demanding more cruisers, fast battleships, or even a strange merger of a torpedo boat and a battleship as in 1912, instead of proper battleships and battlecruisers. In 1904, for example, he even went so far as to publish an anonymous article on armoured cruisers in the *Marine-Rundschau*, only to be publicly rebuffed by two younger naval officers at Tirpitz's [!] request.¹⁵ Though Wilhelm's ideas were very similar to those harboured by Tirpitz's most important adversary on the other side of the North Sea, Admiral John Fisher, who was also a fervent advocate of fast battleships,¹⁶ the way he opened this discussion on new strategic options proved futile. Unfortunately, Wilhelm II simply did not realize that he thus imperilled the programme

¹⁴ Cited in Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power. A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905*, London 1964 (repr.), p. 478, fn. 17.

¹⁵ 'Einiges über Panzerkreuzer', written by L[ehmann], in: *Marine-Rundschau*, vol. 15, 1904, pp. 13-17. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-223, for the answers by lieutenant-captain (ret.), Ernst Count Reventlow, and lieutenant-captain Hopman. For details see Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, pp. 361-372.

¹⁶ Cf. Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, Columbia/South Carolina, 1999.

as well as its basic strategic implications, which he had endorsed only a few years ago. For the time being, he thus increasingly made himself only the object of mockery within the naval officer corps. In 1912, at the end of the annual 'Imperial manoeuvres', during which he had once again given a detailed critique of both strategic and tactical principles of naval warfare in the North Sea, the Chief of the Naval Cabinet wrote into his diary: 'My criticism of this critique is as follows: You need enormous courage (Mordsstirn) to tell so much unprofessional nonsense (laienhaften Unsinn) to so many professional naval officers (Sachverständigen).'¹⁷ Against this background it was hardly astonishing that politicians as well as naval officers judged the Kaiser's increasing enthusiasm for archaeology with some relief. In April 1914, when the German ambassador to the High Porte told the Chancellor that this 'mania for archaeology (Ausgrabungsmanie) was on the verge of insanity (grenzt an Verrücktheit)', the latter answered: 'Let him get on with it (Lassen Sie ihn doch), for as long as he is digging, he does not send telegrams and interfere with politics.'¹⁸

This attitude explains why the Emperor only played a marginal role when the question of peace or war arose. As we have seen, he enjoyed keeping "war-councils", but eventually he shied away from taking the decision for war. Subsequently he soon lost the confidence of his own generals. For example, when some newspapers ridiculed the Kaiser as "Guillaume le timide" during the second Moroccan Crisis, the chief of the General Staff, the younger Moltke clapped his hands in despair and pleaded for putting Germany under the protectorate of Japan instead of further pursuing word policy. Only a year later, Colonel Ludendorff, then chief of the important operations department of the General Staff, bluntly stated that next time no one would ask the Emperor, if a decision about peace or war had to be taken.

This prophecy did in fact come true in July 1914. Of course, the chancellor and the Kaiser discussed the message of the Austrian Emperor, and Wilhelm also asked both the representatives of the army and the navy whether they were ready, but it is more than unlikely that he fully grasped the implications of Bethmann Hollweg's strategy, when he left for his annual cruise to Norway the same day. In this context it

¹⁷ Müller diary, entry of 20 September 1912, BA-MA Müller papers N 159/4.

¹⁸ Cf. the entry of Captain Hopman into his diary, 4 May 1914, BA-MA Hopman papers N 326/10.

should be stressed that – as in the Bismarck era – the chancellor was the man, who was mainly responsible for the future course of German foreign policy. It is true, Moltke had again and again told him that war would be inevitable in the near future and that this war should be waged the sooner the better. However, in July 1914, it was Bethmann Hollweg not the chief of the General staff or the Prussian Minister of War who decided to risk an escalation of the crisis caused by the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne into an international conflict, which, as the chancellor himself was fully aware of, might soon lead to a world war. What remains striking, however, is the fact that this decision and its far-reaching implications were never fully discussed either at the beginning or during the crisis. That this could have happened was the result of both a lack of confidence between those who bore responsibility and of Imperial leadership.

The outbreak of war in August 1914, for which Bethmann Hollweg's risk policy was highly responsible, soon proved a great challenge to Wilhelm's concept as supreme war-lord. While he more or less completely left operations on the land-fronts to the Supreme High Command, he at least tried to direct naval operations himself. Unfortunately, he was never able to fulfil this task. Most important in this respect was his inability either to develop a convincing strategic concept against the Grand Fleet with his naval advisers or to give his admirals a free hand in naval operations in the North Sea, where the Royal Navy's distant blockade had trapped the Kaiser's splendid vessels.¹⁹ Instead, not wanting to risk the High Sea Fleet, he almost continuously wavered with regard to all questions of naval operations as well as naval strategy. In some respect, it is true, his reluctance to risk both the fleet in a decisive battle and a breach with the United States by embarking on unrestricted submarine warfare, he proved more far-sighted than his admirals who simply wanted to save the navy's honour.

This inability to comply with his own claim of being the nation's supreme war lord and of implementing either a convincing policy or strategy was detrimental to his own authority. The diaries of his chief of the naval cabinet are full of complaints about the Emperor's often strange behaviour during the war, ranging from playing

¹⁹ For an excellent summary of the strategic problems of German naval operations during the war see Werner Rahn, 'Strategische Probleme der deutschen Seekriegführung 1914-1918', in Wolfgang Michalka (ed.), *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*, Weyarn 1997, pp. 341-365.

cards or listening to lengthy reports about deciphering the language of the old Hittites instead of seriously discussing reports from the chancellor or front-line commanders.

This inability to fulfil the tasks he had assigned to himself was also detrimental to Germany's political culture in so far as both politicians and officers from the navy as well as the army alike still clung to the idea that the Kaiser was the final arbiter in every respect, in spite of many complaints about Wilhelm's 'character failings'. In this light it is hardly surprising that young naval officers, supported by the Commander-in-Chief of the High Sea Fleet, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, tried to solve this unbearable situation by establishing a Supreme Navy Command in the autumn of 1918.²⁰

From a military point of view, this streamlining of the navy's command structure came too late. However, by pushing the Kaiser aside, the new triumvirate of Scheer, Trotha and Levetzow made clear that in their eyes Wilhelm II was hardly more than a 'shadow Emperor.

Ironically, Grand Admiral Tirpitz, the real 'father of the German battle fleet', and, at the urgent request of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, out of office since March 1916, had already gone much further. After earlier attempts to depose the Kaiser by declaring him insane had failed in the spring of 1915,²¹ because Generals von Einem and von Kessel refused to support him, Tirpitz helped establish the German Fatherland Party in 1917, whose programme eventually opened the gates for a more fundamental criticism of the monarchical idea in which Wilhelm II no longer played a role.²² The fact that the leading figure of the third Imperial High Command, General Ludendorff, soon shared Tirpitz's idea that the monarchy was far more important than the monarch is a striking example of the amount of discontent within Germany's military leadership.

In late October 1918, the wheel had finally turned a full circle. When the Supreme High Command asked for an immediate truce in September 1918, because the army was neither able nor willing to withstand the Allied onslaught on the battlefields of the

²⁰ Cf. Herwig, „Luxury“ Fleet, p. 245.

²¹ Cf. the entries in the diary of Captain Hopman of 22 and 27 March 1915, BA-MA Hopman papers N 326/13.

²² Cf. Raffael Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics, 1914-1930*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1998, pp. 65-81.

Western front anymore, the Supreme Navy Command regarded this as a favourable opportunity to prove the importance of a fleet for the future and to save the honour of the naval officer corps. Most importantly in this respect, the Kaiser, who was still 'nominally' Commander-in-Chief, as Captain Levetzow had put it when helping to establish the new command structure, was more or less left in the dark about the final objectives of this sortie. Completely misjudging the desire for peace among the rank-and-file of the High Sea Fleet, this sortie proved the final blow to the Kaiser's dream of a powerful navy and, moreover, the establishment of the German Empire as the new leading world power in the 20th century. Instead, the navy mutinied and thus gave the final signal for a revolution which swept away the old order within days.

Unsurprisingly, the 'Fleet Kaiser', whose work now lay in ruins, replied to Admiral Scheer's report about the naval mutinies before boarding the train which was to take him into Dutch exile: 'My dear admiral, the Navy has deserted me nicely. [...] I no longer have a Navy'.²³ Field Marshall von Hindenburg, the hero of Tannenberg and chief of the Imperial High Command since 1916, behaved similarly. On 9 November he told the Kaiser that he could no longer rely on the army and that it would be better to go into exile.

While the former survived this debacle politically and sooner than anybody had expected became the "Ersatzkaiser", many conservatives had been looking for in the early years of the Republic of Weimar, the latter was quickly forgotten, for he had failed to fulfil the duties of a Prussian Soldier-King even if this meant death in front-line trenches. Though the great majority of Germany's military leadership remained staunchly conservative and at least partly hoped for a restoration of the monarchy, their former supreme war-lord was not their idol anymore.

To come to a conclusion: this glimpse at the relationship between the Kaiser and the Empire's political and military leadership was supposed to lay open the peculiarities which distinguished Germany from other countries at that time and which were at least partly responsible for the seminal catastrophe, as George Kennan has put it many years ago, which soon proved a heavy burden for the 20th century. To what extent Germany was peculiar with regard to the influence of a victorious army within society,

²³ Cited in Herwig, „Luxury“ Fleet, p. 252.

shaping military values to an almost dangerous degree and to what extent the Reichstag was unfortunately unable to exercise control over both the army and the navy and their direct or indirect attempts at shaping political and social values cannot be discussed here. The fact, however, that Germany's Iron Chancellor as well as many of his successors demonstratively put on their military uniforms when they spoke in the Reichstag, and that many families from the bourgeois, the middle and to some extent even the working classes strove for the patent of an officer or a of a subaltern for their sons is an indication of the high esteem of military values and symbols in Imperial Germany. It makes one think about the civilian virtues of this society that Moltke the elder was regarded the greatest thinker in 1899 by the readers of the "Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung", and that August Bebel, leader of the Social Democratic Party, allegedly still complained in later years that the Prussian Guards, "eighty percent Berliners and ninety percent Social Democrats", would shoot him dead on the spot if given the order.

IV

This overview shows that, firstly, roughly speaking, both German foreign policy and strategic planning can be divided into two parts: the Bismarck era, during which the "Iron Chancellor" though based on military strength persistently tried to secure the existence of the new empire in Europe by pursuing a defensive policy avoiding any serious conflict between the European powers for this would have had disastrous repercussions on its position, and the Wilhelmine era. During the latter, Germany pursued an offensive police aiming at securing Germany a "place in the sun" as well as, most importantly, the status of a world power similar to that of Great Britain.

Secondly, to put it simply, until the 1890s these policies were formulated by Bismarck himself and a small group of diplomats, who had realized that there was no alternative to it. The Kaiser, Wilhelm I., as well as the majority of Germany's military leadership accepted this policy despite occasional doubts about its feasibility towards France and Russia.

From the 1890s onwards, however, the Kaiser, Wilhelm II., played an important part; yet, without the support of diplomats, politicians and leading admirals and generals, he would never have been able to develop a convincing plan which, as far as its financial aspects are concerned, would have found the approval of Parliament.

In both eras, it should be noted, only a small group of decision-makers made the important decisions about the future course of the Empire.

Thirdly, in the 1870s and 1880s as well as in the 1890s and early 1900s there was never any direct threat to the Empire. It is true, time and again, France and/or Russia were suspected of forging plans against the Empire, which, in turn caused the military professionals to develop offensive plans against both states or even to recommend preemptive strikes to destroy them before they became too strong. However, these plans were never implemented due to the conviction of the political leadership that such a policy might turn out a failure.

In spite of occasional attempts by the military to overrule the politicians, the latter eventually always managed to defend the priority of the sceptre over the sword.

Fourthly, all members of Germany's political as well as military leadership were always aware of the need to integrate finance, domestic politics, diplomacy and military policy. However, whereas Bismarck was by and large successful in achieving this aim, his successors soon failed, for they have enormously underestimated the impact of their decision to embark on a far-reaching world policy on almost every aspect of German policy. Even though some of them eventually did, they simply could not implement a complete change of course, because this would have had enormous repercussions on the stability of the existing political system.

Whereas, last but not least, ideology played no significant role in the 1870s and 1880s, for Bismarck's policy simply followed the traditional rules of European diplomacy, world policy was a different matter. It was deeply influenced by social-darwinistic ideas and, as such, implied a high degree of irrational convictions, which, in turn, had a deep impact on the development of a rational policy and military strategy.