

*The Nationalist Fleet: Radical Nationalism and  
The Imperial German Navy from Unification to 1914*

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**Introduction**

During the two decades prior to the start of World War I, Germany engaged in one of the greatest naval buildups in history. In doing so, Germany was transformed from a strictly land-based continental military power to a highly competitive and competent sea power. This ultimately led to one of the greatest arms races in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently produced a lasting antagonism between Germany and Britain. That being said, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the intricacies of the arms race; instead it will focus on the roots of Germany's great naval fleet construction plans between 1897 and 1914. The goals will be to explain how nationalism was the founding principal on which the Imperial German Navy operated and how nationalism acted as the leading force behind the navy's popularity and development. This paper examines how nationalism drove citizens, politicians, agitation groups, and the navy itself to support and fund the development of a large naval fleet. The argument is that the Imperial German Navy was in itself a nationalist organization, which depended upon right-wing agitation groups like the *Deutscher Flottenverein* (the German Navy League), and the manipulation of nationalist fervor by the country's leaders to pursue the massive fleet construction program that took place. Ultimately, Germany's naval construction plans were sidelined by war in 1914, but its failures truly began a decade earlier. The provocation of Britain forced a moderation in Germany's ship construction plans, which subsequently produced widespread criticism of the nation's leaders. Britain viewed the challenge presented by Germany's naval build up as a serious threat to its sea going interests, and as a waste of

potential for an alliance that could have addressed common concerns about the rising power of France and Russia.

### **Foundations of German Nationalism: 'A Place in the Sun'**

The origins of nationalism within Germany during the 1920s and 1930s stemmed from the historical representation of the nation's patriotic and military past, such as the triumphs of Germanic tribes over Roman armies, the revolution of 1848 and the wars of unification.<sup>1</sup> The collective memory of these events paved the way for the growth of a style of political liberalism that widely perpetuated the ideals of ardent nationalism, political individualism and the obsession with power for a unified Germany.<sup>2</sup> The cultivation of such nationalism had been driven by a form of individualism that saw the greatest realization of the self-coming through immersion in some greater purpose or cause (in this case, the realization of German unity and the advancement of German culture). Historian Margret MacMillan provides a precise understanding of what this nationalism within Germany represented:

“For nationalists the nation was both greater and more important than the individual human beings who made it up. Unlike its members, the nation was eternal or close to it. One of the key assumptions of late nineteenth-century nationalism was that there had been something called a German nation for centuries, its members marked out from their neighbors by shared values and practices, usually better ones than those of their neighbors. While the general pattern was the same, members of a nation were identified by their shared attributes as language or religion and linked together by their history...”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, nationalists believed that the nation of *Germania* was an already existing and even mythical force well before the country had been officially unified in 1871. Nationalism drove many of the German-speaking peoples to see themselves as part of the Germanic community even though they had yet to be officially consolidated under a single state banner. As a result of the 1848 revolution, nationalism spread throughout the political, industrial,

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace: The Road to 1914* (Toronto: Penguin Canada Books, 2013), pp. 88, 269.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London, Macdonald & Co Publishers, 1965), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 267.

ideological and emotional spheres of the German life, which had ultimately led to the unification and founding of the Imperial German nation.<sup>4</sup>

The same nationalist fervor that created a state for the German nation would be continuously utilized and even manipulated by the country's leadership in order to garner support for national policies and initiatives. Bernhard von Bulow, one of Germany's Chancellors during this period, suggested that "[Nationalism] was strongly promoted by [Emperor] Wilhelm and his conservative advisors [as a means] of bringing together German nationalists and conservative forces in support of the crown, and at the same time undermining the growing socialist movement and the strong regional feelings..."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the widespread nationalism that captured the hearts and minds of the German people was employed and often manipulated to achieve the goals of the nation's leadership. Manipulation in this manner does not suggest that leaders themselves did not believe in the same ideals, but instead that they understood how to effectively utilize such forces in order to enact policies. This point is crucial in understanding the subsequent discussion of manipulation in this paper, as the leaders who used these methods should not be viewed as anything else but ardent nationalists in their own right. The strength of an ideology like nationalism is not Machiavellian, in the sense that it regards power more important than purpose; instead, we have to employ the interpretations of modern political philosophers, such as Antonio Gramsci or Michel Foucault, in order to understand its form. Rather than forcing subjugation, the nationalist elite broadly shares its view of the common good, which becomes a hegemonic consensus, and rather than forcing consent, some of the power of the ideology migrates upwards, shaping the contours through which it flows.<sup>6</sup> The process is best described as a mobilization and amplification of existing public biases.

Nationalism in Germany during this period, as MacMillan argues, was not strictly about pride in one's own nation, but was largely defined by the fear created by the perception of an oppositional force.<sup>7</sup> This threat could derive from both internal forces such as political rivalries, or from external actors such as other nations, like Britain. Even though nationalism seemed to suggest that Germany was a strong nation, in the early years after unification there were still many internal divisions. The nation's leaders were faced with the effects that industrialization had on the country's social and economic structure, desires for social reform and the

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik: German Sea Power before the Tirpitz Era* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1997), p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Asli Duldal, "Power and Ideology in Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci: A Comparative Analysis," *Review of History and Political Science* 2 (June 2014), pp. 149-67.

<sup>7</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 271.

longstanding issues caused by the confessional divide.<sup>8</sup> The persistence of these internal issues forced the nation's leaders to pursue a strong nationalist agenda that was aimed at external threats, mainly in order to prevent the problems in the domestic sphere from worsening. Historian Geoff Eley argues that nationalist sentiment towards external threats was used as a "diversion outwards from internal tensions," and this explanation suggests why Germany, and other leading colonial powers, pursued such aggressive foreign policies.<sup>9</sup>

Attempts to steer around the serious faults inside German society drove much of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's colonial policy in the post-unification period, as popular nationalism was exploited in order to counterbalance the problems caused by the domestic social and power struggle.<sup>10</sup> MacMillan suggests that Bismarck had never been greatly interested in the value of colonies, and he was quoted in saying: "My map of Africa lies here in Europe."<sup>11</sup> However, the majority of Germany's citizens desired imperial territories and applied pressure to Bismarck and the nation's leaders to peruse similar acquisitions made by other major European powers, as depicted by a satirical cartoon published in *Kladderadatsch*.<sup>12</sup> Eley argues that this rise and focus towards nationalist-driven colonial policies "inherently provided for the developed and widespread support for Germany's armed forces."<sup>13</sup> Where the army had previously provided the foundations of the nation, it was now the navy's turn to achieve nationalist and imperialist ambitions. It would become the prime mission of Germany's Navy to achieve the nation's 'place in the sun,' as popular German historian Heinrich von Treitschke had once stated.<sup>14</sup> However, this was not a uniquely German ambition, as all the major European powers had been swept up in the rise of colonialism. What coincided with this rise in colonialist ambition was that of navalism, which promoted the ability of naval forces to effectively carry out the imperial goals of the home nation.

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<sup>8</sup> Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (London: Yale University Press: 1980), pp. 2, 3, 183.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2 - 3.

<sup>11</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> "The South Seas is the Mediterranean of the Future," *Kladderadatsch* 37, No. 32 (July 13, 1884): p. 128, *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington, DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>13</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

## Navalism and the Rise of the Imperial German Navy

Germany's Navy was already a formidable force prior to the implementation of the naval construction plans of 1897. By 1885, Germany possessed the third largest armored battle fleet in Europe, only outnumbered in capital vessels by Russia and Britain.<sup>15</sup> Even though Germany possessed a strong naval force, it did not have the kind of historical narrative that the army held with its Prussian heritage. The German Army was steeped in centuries-old Prussian tradition; whereas the navy was a relatively new force that only truly began its development in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> However, it was this lack of Prussian tradition that led the navy to be based on national principals, and to become truly a German organization in its own right. Historian Patrick Kelly points out that, "In the 1840's the rising nationalism of the German bourgeoisie, fueled partly by the defenseless state of German maritime commerce around the world, weighed in for the first time on naval questions."<sup>17</sup> Historian Jonathan Steinberg would further emphasize this opinion by arguing that the German Navy was in itself the "child of German liberalism, and the Revolution of 1848."<sup>18</sup> The Revolution of 1848 had produced ardent German nationalism, political individualism, and an obsession with power within liberal politics.<sup>19</sup> The Navy strongly depended upon the German liberal movement to provide a clear dividing line between itself and the traditionally conservative history of the Prussian Army. It was the liberal movement that structured the navy as a truly German national and not traditional Prussian, organization. Steinberg argues that, "no other German, or Prussian, institution could call on the same emotional association with the nationalist movement than the navy."<sup>20</sup> So navalists saw a Germany larger than Prussia geographically, and larger than the Junkers socially.

The German nationalist connection with the navy went much further than just the history of its conception, but also involved the makeup of its members and associations. The navy became a place for young middle class individuals who aspired to become members of the officer corps, whereas the same opportunities within the army were not as easily achievable.<sup>21</sup> The German Army at this time had an increasingly middle class composition, but its officer corps was still primarily structured around the Junkers and their longstanding connection with

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<sup>15</sup> Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik*, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2011), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Prussian tradition.<sup>22</sup> The navy did not pursue a similar policy because it was a relatively new force that did not share the same connections to Prussian history.<sup>23</sup> This inclusion of individuals who were barred from the army elite due to their societal standing, demonstrates the navy's truly nationalist character. That being said, historian Lawrence Sondhaus argues that the inclusion of commoners to expand the ranks of the officer corps was done partly out of necessity during fleet expansion.<sup>24</sup> However, even if the leadership within the navy only opened up the officer corps to commoners out of necessity, it still presented an outward image of being an inclusionary national organization. As the army continued to project an old-fashioned image of being Prussian, the navy stood as a strictly German organization, in which Germans of any class could find a respectable job.

The navy's connection with the German people did not stop at its own membership, but extended to the people who built its ships and forged its weapons. In northern Germany, the working class had direct contact with the navy on the daily basis, whether it was during the construction of ships, or simply working in proximity of a major naval base.<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that labourers working on defence contracts for the army did not feel any connection with that military service, but in a period when the importance of building the German Fleet was so ingrained in the national consciousness, workers in naval dockyards could only have felt great pride in their contribution.<sup>26</sup> Steinberg describes this relationship, which had been cultivated in the shipyards, as the essential connection between the nation's "middle class naval officers and his working class civilian cousin."<sup>27</sup> The navy was largely seen as a middle class institution as most of its support derived from the rising industrial and commercial classes, but it was also recognized for its connection with the working classes through their proximity to the dry docks of Germany.<sup>28</sup> The army did not share the same presence within the public sphere, which greatly hampered its ability to be widely accepted as a truly national force instead of just a Prussian one. On a daily basis the navy stood in clear view of many average Germans, whether they were working class individuals labouring at naval bases, or residents of a city such as Kiel, who saw the ships operating offshore.<sup>29</sup> Even though the majority of Germany's population lived inland, the navy still presented greater exposure to the average citizen than that of the army just by its physical presence. The navy's ability to drive connections with nationalist

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<sup>22</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, pp.75, 317.

<sup>23</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik*, p. 209.

<sup>25</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, "Great Britain Before 1914," in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars*, ed. Ernest R. May (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

sentiment was amplified by this kind of basic presence, but its nationalist connections extended much further.

By 1884, German public opinion had begun to demand colonies, and the rapid expansion of overseas trade, particularly since the growth of German nationalism after unification.<sup>30</sup> Kelly points out that within a quarter of a century, Germany had risen to be the second largest trading power in the world after it had doubled the amount of its imported goods, tripled its exports and made a tenfold expansion of its merchant fleet.<sup>31</sup> The growth of Germany's navy was not only an integral part of the nation's economic growth, but also a key contributor to its expanding political power.<sup>32</sup> Historian Terrell Gottschall argues that the German public had turned to their navy as the nation's "vanguard of imperialism," and the primary force to project German trade and policy across the world.<sup>33</sup> This is supported by the fact that the between the years of 1898 and 1914, over 1.1 million German's joined the naval-focused lobby group, the *Deutscher Flottenverein*, which ultimately represented the single biggest publicly-supported group of its kind in the country and the largest to promote a naval cause throughout world history.<sup>34</sup> This meant that the strictly continental force of the army would be forced to take a secondary position behind that of the navy. The navy was the only military force that had the ability to operate across oceans, and thus was the only organization that had the ability to achieve the desires of the nationalist and colonialist German public. It was domestic, social, and political structures that propelled Germany's foreign policy forward into an era of global expansion, one that could have only been achieved through a strong naval force.<sup>35</sup> This new form of policy, directed by Kaiser Wilhelm II, was called *Weltpolitik*, and it was developed on the foundation of German nationalism, and on the authority of influential thinkers who supported nationalistic trends.<sup>36</sup>

Key intellectual figures within Germany, such as Friedrich List, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Max Weber, provided strong support for the ideals of German nationalism, and the associated build-up of strong military forces. Almost a half-century before the first major naval construction policies, List provided some of the earliest support for the

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<sup>30</sup> Gottschall, *By Order of the Kaiser: Otto von Diederichs and the Rise of the Imperial German Navy, 1865-1902* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2003), p. 103.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 146.

<sup>32</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Gottschall, *By Order of the Kaiser*, p. 103.

<sup>34</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 330.

<sup>35</sup> Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914* (Boston, Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

growth of Germany's naval strength. He stressed the importance of naval power for the purposes of defence and the projection of German national dignity.<sup>37</sup> This meant that it was the job of the German Navy to not only safeguard the national security of Germany by protecting its local waters, but by gaining an international presence, which would also in turn protect German interests. More theoretical were the ideas of Hegel, who spoke of the state as the form of a "divine idea as it exists on earth," and who argued that armed strength that was the instrument of this divine idea.<sup>38</sup> German nationalists often cited those thinkers, whose ideas influenced German policy formation. No one thinker was more influential than Max Weber, as he was developing his theoretical concepts during the start of the naval build up in 1897. Historian Rolf Hobson argues for the historical importance of the nationalist and liberal imperialist Weber, who in 1897 advocated that "ruthless pursuit of world and naval policy was an unavoidable tragic necessity" for Germany.<sup>39</sup> It was Weber who saw the navy as a necessary military instrument in a war for "economic *Lebensraum*," in the policy of growing Germany's global power.<sup>40</sup> Weber was noted as saying that "*Weltpolitik* must be pursued as ruthlessly as necessary, even if it leads to war with a naval power like Britain."<sup>41</sup> The navy would become the key instrument of the Kaiser's policy of *Weltpolitik*, and it was from such thinkers that intellectual support of the policy was derived.

That being said, Germany was not the only nation focused on strengthening its naval forces in the pursuit of colonial policies. The major seafaring nations of Britain and the United States were also pursuing strong naval policies to protect their national interests abroad.<sup>42</sup> The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of worldwide naval fleet expansion, where navies had become the key military force for ambitious nations looking to extend their imperialist agendas.<sup>43</sup> This period was dominated by the concept of navalism, which historian Rolf Hobson describes as, "the advocacy, or carrying out of a policy of naval rearmament that was designed to serve as a means of national aggrandizement, and that interpreted national defence requirements within the context of an alleged need to expand."<sup>44</sup> This global strategy is depicted in a 1909 cover of Puck magazine, in which all the major world powers are depicted as playing a

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<sup>37</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 208.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry 1900-1914* (London, Hart-Davis and MacGibbon Publishing, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 322.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

'high-stakes poker' game with their navies.<sup>45</sup> In other words, navalism was a theory based on the concept that the navy was the main tool in achieving national goals within the international arena.

The support for navalism during the 1890's derived from the theories of Alfred T. Mahan, a captain in the United States Navy who wrote a book on naval strategy titled *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.<sup>46</sup> In this book Mahan argued that,

Production, with the necessity of exchanging products, shipping, whereby the exchange is carried on, and colonies, which facilitate and enlarge the operations of shipping and tend to protect it by multiplying points of safety is to be found the key to much of the history, as well as of the policy, of nations bordering upon the sea.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, Mahan pointed out the significance of having a powerful naval fleet that was strong in numbers, not only to protect the nation from blockade, but also to secure colonial gains and seagoing trade.<sup>48</sup> The greatest appreciation of this book came from within Germany, and not just from the navy, but mainly from nationalist movements and the political leadership. The Kaiser was an ardent believer of Mahan's ideas and was quoted as saying in a letter to a friend in 1894, "I am just now not reading but devouring Captain Mahan's book and am trying to learn it by heart."<sup>49</sup> Aside from the political leadership, Hobson argues that German nationalists also utilized Mahan to ensure the success of their expansionist foreign policy.<sup>50</sup> That being said, Hobson also suggests that much of Mahan's work was misinterpreted, or twisted to coincide with the theories of German nationalism, and in the end promoted an unrealistic naval doctrine that nearly led to war.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the Germans, a largely landlocked nation, read and applied strategic policies that were truly meant to serve islands or sea-bound continental powers, such as Britain and the United States. This suggests that those utilizing Mahan to push navalism in Germany had miscalculated in developing a policy that

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<sup>45</sup> L.M. Glackens, "No Limit," *Puck*, September 22, 1909. Photo: MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Holger Herwig, *Luxury Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Alfred Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1890), p. 28

<sup>48</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 180.

<sup>49</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

would best serve the country's interests. However, it was not only Mahan's influence that accounted for the rise of navalism under Kaiser.

The industrialization of Germany had uncovered an inherent weakness, a dependence on seaborne imports that could prove decisive during wartime. This led to an understanding of Germany's most important naval strategic weakness in a war with another maritime power.<sup>52</sup> The two leading figures within Germany during the early half of the 1890's who attempted to address these issues were Leo Von Caprivi, the Chancellor, and Friedrich von Hollman, the Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office. Caprivi believed that the navy's main role was to protect the German coastline from an enemy blockade, thus leaving all lines of supply open.<sup>53</sup> Hobson points out that Caprivi's policy was based on the assumption that continental partners were the key to Germany's economic growth and stability, and overseas trade was of lesser importance.<sup>54</sup> Even if that was a correct assumption, it did not coincide with the nationalist sentiment that had swept through Germany. The nationalist support for the navy, navalism, and imperialism was far too prevalent within all aspects of German society for such a policy to be accepted. Hollman attempted to appease such sentiment by raising the naval budget several times before 1897, but this was not enough for the Kaiser, who relieved both Hollman and Caprivi of their positions.<sup>55</sup> The Kaiser found a new Secretary of the Navy who had a similar vision of how Germany's naval force should be directed. It was through the power of the Kaiser and his new appointee, Tirpitz, that German nationalist sentiment would be utilized and manipulated in developing one of the greatest fleets in the world.

### **The Kaiser and his Boyhood Dream**

Nationalist support of the navy reached the highest levels of German leadership during the 1890s, and it was this same leadership that manipulated national sentiment in directions that also furthered their own nationalist goals. This does not suggest that they cynically exploited nationalism to strictly further their prestige and power, but instead that they manipulated nationalist sentiment to further policies that they believed better served the nation. The Kaiser was a strong nationalist in his own right and the product of the era in which he lived, a period of navalism, colonialism and imperialism. The Kaiser strongly believed that Germany's "future lies upon the water. The more Germans go out upon the waters, whether it

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics, 1914-1930* (Boston, Humanities Press, Inc., 1998), p. 3.

be in races or regattas whether it be in journeys across the ocean, or in the service of the battle flag, so much the better it will be for us.”<sup>56</sup> However, the Kaiser would also utilize nationalist sentiment to further his own desires for prestige, and for him this prestige could only have been achieved through the creation of a large and powerful naval fleet. Historian Nick Hewitt recounts an event in 1904 where “the Kaiser stated at a dinner in Kiel that as a small boy, visiting ‘the family’ at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight and seeing the mighty Royal Navy spread across the Solent, ‘there awoke in me the wish to build ships of my own like these someday, and when I was grown up to possess a fine a navy as the English.’”<sup>57</sup> The Kaiser was also quoted as saying, “what my Grandfather did for the army, I will do for the navy,” which seems to suggest that the expansion of the fleet had long been a personal project for the Kaiser, than just being a product of nationalist hoopla in the 1890s.<sup>58</sup> Even if that was the case, there was no doubt that the Kaiser viewed the ultimate raise of his navy as beneficial for the nation, and it was the nationalist support for this build up that he would use as a foundation for his ambitions. Historian Holger Herwig points out that the Kaiser was able to appeal to nationalist sentiment by such things as commonly wearing a naval uniform, so that when he was viewed in public, Germans would recognize his ardent support for the navy.<sup>59</sup> A popular photo of the Kaiser showed him wearing his naval uniform along with his two leading admirals.<sup>60</sup> However, if the photo had been taken at a different angle, in which one could not see the Kaiser’s face, he could have easily been mistaken for an admiral himself. Symbolism was critical for the perpetuation of nationalism within Germany, so when the Kaiser wore the uniform of the navy, it was meant to insight public attention towards the nationalist connection to the naval cause.

The Kaiser ultimately acted as a figurehead and a symbol for nationalist support of the navy, as much of the policy behind naval expansion was developed and enacted through the leadership of Tirpitz. This does not suggest that the Kaiser lost control over naval policy, since as historian Lawrence Sondhaus argues, the decision to increase the size of Germany’s naval fleet was ultimately in the hands of the Kaiser.<sup>61</sup> The Kaiser’s ability to enact or block policy stemmed from the powers granted to him by the 1871 Constitution of the German Empire. The Constitution stated that with regard to military and naval affairs, the Reichstag was the ultimate

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<sup>56</sup> Nick Hewitt, *The Kaiser’s Pirates: Hunting Germany’s Raiding Cruisers in WWI* (New York: Skyhorse Publications, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Th. Jürgensen, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Admirals,” (1910), *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington, DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>61</sup> Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik*, p. 229.

political body responsible for legislation.<sup>62</sup> Kelly argues that the key to the Reichstag's power was its ability to vote on national and military budgets, a capability granted to them by the articles of the Constitution.<sup>63</sup> However, this power could be viewed as largely superficial because the Constitution also gave the Kaiser the ability to veto the wishes of the Reichstag.<sup>64</sup> Even more damaging to the Reichstag's ability to be an effective legislative assembly was the power granted to the Kaiser in the Constitution that gave him "the right to summon, to open, to prorogue and to close both the Federal Council and the Reichstag."<sup>65</sup> German legislators, like all politicians, lived in perpetual fear of actually having to risk their sinecures through elections, and the Kaiser had the formal power to make them face such challenges. That being said, Kelly argues that the powers granted to the Kaiser through Article 12 would have been very difficult to enact within Germany as the non-Prussian federal states would have seen it as a Prussian power grab. The political consequences that would have unfolded due to such a move by the Kaiser would have threatened the stability of the still young nation. This does not mean that the Kaiser did not threaten such actions, as Kelly describes how the Kaiser "blustered about a government coup, with the army's backing, against the Reichstag" in retaliation for their lack of cooperation with the Emperor's wishes.<sup>66</sup> Cases where the Kaiser's ultimate power was questioned usually resulted from his brash behaviour, which in some cases threatened to damage the policies being put forth by Tirpitz. Tirpitz was successful in challenging the Kaiser by "manipulating the erratic Emperor, not by flattery or subservience, but by a shrewd combination of defiance and resignation threats, mingled with tact and occasional tactical accommodation."<sup>67</sup> The Kaiser did have the ultimate power, but Tirpitz was the mastermind of the naval construction plans. The Kaiser recognized the importance of his admiral and was willing to concede his wishes.

### **Tirpitz: The Nationalist Naval Officer**

The true mastermind of the Kaiser's naval ambitions was Tirpitz, and it was through his actions that broader nationalist aspirations were manipulated, and the Reichstag convinced into supporting laws that ensured consistent naval construction and support. Tirpitz represented the perfect image of a leader in the German Navy, as he was a nationalist liberal and rose

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<sup>62</sup> "Legislation of the Reich," Article 4, *Constitution of the German Empire* (April 16, 1871), *German History in Documents and Images* (German Historical Institute: Washington, DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>63</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> "Projects of Law on Military Affairs," Article 5, *Constitution of the German Empire* (April 16, 1871)

<sup>65</sup> "The Emperor has the Right," Article 12, *Constitution of the German Empire* (April 16, 1871)

<sup>66</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

through the ranks to become an admiral, even without a noble lineage.<sup>68</sup> Tirpitz's rise to power demonstrated the navy's quintessential role as an outlet for German nationalist aspirations, in which any German of merit could reach high levels of command. When Tirpitz took power in 1897 he immediately placed the navy at the focal point of German nationalism, and he emphasized the importance of increasing the strength of the nation's fleet.<sup>69</sup> Tirpitz wrote in his memoir that he "considered it to be his privilege and duty to bring home to the broader masses of the German people the interests that were at stake regarding the navy."<sup>70</sup> Being a liberal nationalist himself, he knew that the idea of increasing German prestige was popular and could easily be utilized in support of naval policy. Historian Jonathan Steinberg argues that Tirpitz was unmatched within the arena of domestic politics, in his ability to manage men, as an administrator, as a negotiator, and most significantly, as a manipulator of public sentiment.<sup>71</sup> The Kaiser even praised the effectiveness of Tirpitz as a master wirepuller during the lead up to the passing of the first navy law, saying that Tirpitz had "absolutely fooled the members of the Reichstag. They had not the smallest idea when they passed it [first navy law], what its consequences would be, for the law really meant that anything he wanted would be granted."<sup>72</sup> Kelly says Tirpitz's "pragmatic and skillful quasi-parliamentary approach was, by and large, a good example of a rational actor in pursuit of a bureaucratic political goal and [he] was willing to use any means necessary, even parliamentary methods to enhance his own power."<sup>73</sup> Tirpitz was a truly ardent nationalist, but like the Kaiser he utilized nationalism to achieve his own political agendas that were designed to stir-up pride and national unity among Germans.<sup>74</sup>

The cultivation of Tirpitz's devotion to the nationalist cause stemmed from his six years of service in the Prussian Navy prior to unification.<sup>75</sup> Tirpitz describes in his memoirs how the Prussian Navy truly lacked any connection with Prussian traditions, values and politics.<sup>76</sup> The navy's close ties with industry and commerce meant that the force was largely segregated from military and strategic matters by the dominance of the army, and instead was viewed in relation with mercantile dealings.<sup>77</sup> The origins of these commerce issues stem from the Hanseatic League, a federation of mainly German city-states that stretched along the Baltic from Russia to

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<sup>68</sup> Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik*, p. 210.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>70</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, Vol. 1, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1919), p. 143.

<sup>71</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 206.

<sup>72</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 456.

<sup>74</sup> Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics 1862-1914* (Boston, Allen & Unwin Publishing, 1984), p. 164.

<sup>75</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5, 14.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the North Sea, which desired an effective naval security force to protect its maritime interests.<sup>78</sup> Kelly states that the rising nationalism among the German bourgeoisie in these cities, fuelled by the defenseless state of their maritime commerce, led them to peruse the possibilities of building a naval force.<sup>79</sup> Tirpitz describes this period with great distain, as he recounts how unacceptable it was in his eyes that German fishermen were forced to fly Danish flags in order to prevent harassment from the maritime forces of neighbouring states.<sup>80</sup> However, even as Prussia began to build a tangible naval force in order to protect its maritime trading interest, its effectiveness over the course of two major wars during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did little to improve its reputation.

Tirpitz describes how the navy very seldom became an issue in Prussian politics, as it was viewed largely as a supplement to the army and was not a significant participant in military operations.<sup>81</sup> The navy's poor performances and inability to breakout of blockade in the Baltic Sea during the wars against Denmark in 1864, and then France in 1870, did little to change the prevailing balance of forces.<sup>82</sup> These circumstances provided for an environment in which the navy struggled to develop its own traditions and assert its importance in Prussia, even though fledgling naval cadet Tirpitz spoke very highly of his superior officers and thought they acted professionally, even with the material with which they had to work and train.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately for the soon-to-be lieutenant, the unification of Germany did not initially bring about drastic changes for the fledgling naval force, but Tirpitz recognized that the unity of Germany was a step in the right direction.<sup>84</sup>

In a few short years, Tirpitz saw the subsequent creation of a German nation through the eyes of a young naval officer. He describes how he was filled with "mixed feelings" in 1867 when he watched the lowering of the Prussian naval ensign for the last time and its replacement with the flag of the North German Federation, which lacked the traditional Prussian eagle, of which all sailors were proud.<sup>85</sup> However, only four short years later Tirpitz describes "feelings of great historical change" after the unification of Germany, especially as he became an officer in the Imperial Navy and saw the creation of a new ensign.<sup>86</sup> The new Imperial German naval ensign was characterized by a red, white and black tri-colour pattern, iron cross and the

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<sup>78</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, pp. 18 -19.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Hewitt, *The Kaiser's Pirates*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, pp. 5, 14.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17 - 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

prominence of the Prussian eagle in the centre.<sup>87</sup> The proud feelings shown by Tirpitz and his young colleagues were not shared among the militarist ruling class of the new, united Germany, as memory of the navy's humiliating performances against Denmark and France won it no praise.<sup>88</sup> However, with the unification of Germany came the appointment of Admiral Albrecht von Stosch, who, despite being an infantry officer by training, laid the foundation for the nationalist navy of the 1890s and become a leading influence on the young Tirpitz.<sup>89</sup>

Tirpitz attributes Stosch with the development of Germany's maritime interests, and the overall strengthening, protection and projection of 'Germandom' around the globe.<sup>90</sup> Tirpitz describes how the policies that had been promoted by Stosch met with "great difficulty" in a political environment dominated by the army, but Stosch was effective in countering these perceptions by being the first leader to bring the navy into Germany's national view.<sup>91</sup> Stosch had recognized that if the largely land-secluded German population recognized the significant opportunities that the sea could provide, then people would grow to support the navy as the primary force necessary to achieve the nation's seagoing aspirations.<sup>92</sup> Tirpitz argues that it was Stosch who truly promoted the navy's ability to provide the nation with colonies that it had increasingly become keen to acquire.<sup>93</sup> During this period, Stosch ordered Germany's naval force to travel around the globe visiting foreign ports, where the 'showing the flag' could not only serve to bolster Germany's geo-political stance, but also influence German emigrants to move back to the Fatherland.<sup>94</sup> This is a policy that greatly influenced Tirpitz, as he felt great disappointment about Germans who emigrated and then assimilated into the cultures of other nations.<sup>95</sup> Once in power, Tirpitz would continue with Stosch's policies by utilizing the navy as a primary tool to reconnect German emigrants with the homeland.<sup>96</sup> The period of Stosch's leadership over the German Navy was the time when Tirpitz's nationalist and navalist attitudes were nurtured. Many of the policies and strategies that Stosch initiated would be pursued, and in many ways achieved, by the actions of Tirpitz.

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<sup>87</sup> "The Kapp Putsch: Members of the Ehrhardt Marine Brigade with the Imperial Navy Flag," March 1920, *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington, DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>88</sup> Hewitt, *The Kaiser's Pirates*, pp. 7, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, p. 18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 24 - 25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24 - 25.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, pp. 33 - 34.

<sup>95</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 136.

<sup>96</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, pp. 198 - 199.

Once in power at the Naval Office in 1897, Tirpitz immediately diverted naval policy towards the protection of overseas and foreign markets, as the continental partners that his predecessor Caprivi relied upon could and would ultimately become threats.<sup>97</sup> Tirpitz argued that the, “political importance of sea power in peacetime would be to protect Germany’s overseas trade and colonies.”<sup>98</sup> Tirpitz knew that this policy would find little opposition, as it was in line with nationalist sentiment that focused attention upon the acquisition and protection of overseas territories.<sup>99</sup> Tirpitz suggests that this policy was meant to ensure “Germany’s ability to exert itself in the interests of its own self-preservation.”<sup>100</sup> Historian Ivo Nikolai Lambi suggests that Tirpitz developed a multilevel ideology that provided the foundation for his naval policy, and it included the linking of naval power to economic power, and of economic power with political power, which would bring rise to Germany’s global position.<sup>101</sup> The essence of this policy can be seen through Tirpitz’s own words:

The creation of a mammoth battle fleet would provide the power basis for a great overseas policy. This, in turn, would mean large building contracts and hence prosperity for German industry and proletariat alike. Boom and profits would buttress at home the dominant political and social position of the ruling elements and it would hopefully arrest demands for further parliamentarization on part of the social democrats and liberals, and at the same time would turn the energies and ambitions of Germany’s middle classes toward overseas expansion.<sup>102</sup>

Tirpitz also wrote in a letter to his mentor, Stosch, saying that, “naval power is the only politically versatile type of power there is.”<sup>103</sup> Tirpitz said that he recognized what a strong naval force could achieve in providing security and prosperity for Germany, but in order to reach these goals, grassroots nationalism had to be utilized in creating a political consensus in favour of naval policy. More than manufacturing consent, he wanted to manufacture enthusiasm. This would be Tirpitz’s main goal: to manipulate nationalist sentiment in driving political policy within the Reichstag, thus granting him and the Kaiser the naval fleet that they desired.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 126.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>99</sup> Gottschall, *By Order of the Kaiser*, p. 103.

<sup>100</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, p. 53.

<sup>101</sup> Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, p. 139.

<sup>102</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 39.

<sup>103</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz. “Message to Admiral von Stosch on the Political Function and Significance of Naval Power in Germany’s Relations with England.” Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, February 13, 1896, *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington, DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>104</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 306.

Tirpitz insisted that the entire government had to stand behind the construction of a larger fleet, and to support such a policy he directed his own agency and subordinates, and he established connections with other government bodies.<sup>105</sup> Such an ambitious growth of the navy would require strong support from within the Reichstag, for as long as it existed as an institution, it would hold the ultimate say in whether increased construction would take place. The Kaiser, as noted, had the ability to dissolve the Reichstag, as he threatened to do in reaction to debates over naval policy in 1899, but as historian Holger Herwig argues, this was not a real option for the Kaiser, who would have only destabilized the nation in doing so.<sup>106</sup> Even so, historian Rolf Hobson argues that the Reichstag was wary of the Kaiser's ambitions, but in turn trusted and believed in the professional competence of Tirpitz when it came to the navy.<sup>107</sup> Over the next decade, Tirpitz put forth five major Naval Laws, and a series of subsequent Supplementary Laws, each of which increased the number of ships to be built, along with decreasing the retirement age of existing ships.<sup>108</sup> One of the most important factors behind Tirpitz's success in influencing politics over the naval issue was the increasing nationalism of German Catholics and their political representative, the Centre Party.

### **The Catholic Centre Party: Politics of Nationalism and the Navy**

It was within the walls of the Reichstag where Germany's naval aspirations, encompassed in the Naval Bills, had to be approved before they were able to become law and translate into the building of ships. This is where nationalists debated their claims that "Germany's future, perhaps its very existence, depended on the growth in its sea power."<sup>109</sup> However, in the Reichstag not all the parties represented had been in agreement with the nationalist perception of Germany's future, which led the Social Democrats and Left leaning Liberals to vote against the first naval law.<sup>110</sup> Steinberg argues that the issues surrounding naval development split much of the Reichstag, with Liberals, Catholics and the Social Democrats all perusing their own agendas.<sup>111</sup> This was a serious and complex issue that Tirpitz was forced to face, as his dreams of a large battle fleet were totally dependent upon the Reichstag passing his proposed laws.<sup>112</sup> If the multitude of parties in the Reichstag were unable to support the nationalist pursuit of

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<sup>105</sup> Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, p. 139.

<sup>106</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 306.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 240, 242.

<sup>109</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 241.

<sup>110</sup> Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics*, p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 35.

<sup>112</sup> Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, p. 150

imperialism and navalism, then the dream fleet of the Kaiser and Tirpitz would never come to fruition.<sup>113</sup> It had become clear to Tirpitz that political success for the navy could only be won after gaining support from the Catholic Centre Party, which had a long history of being ostracized by Germany's leaders.

Eley describes the tactics employed by Tirpitz to influence the Centre Party towards nationalist consensus as "gradual, peaceful and careful persuasion."<sup>114</sup> One of the most significant considerations that Tirpitz had to keep in mind was the sometimes erratic and brash behaviour of the Kaiser, who was not in favour with the nation's Catholics after the continuation of the Jesuit laws that were associated with the *Kulterkampf* of the Bismarck era.<sup>115</sup> Kelly suggests that for Tirpitz to win votes from the Centre, he had to "first convince the Emperor to avoid making inflammatory public statements in favor of the bill, lest complaints escalate that the fleet was the Emperor's plaything."<sup>116</sup> That being said, the efforts by Tirpitz were not as necessary as he might have recognized at the time, as the Centre Party, under Ernest Lieber's leadership, was shifting on its own towards the nationalist cause.<sup>117</sup>

Germany's religious divide had a long history that went back to the period of the *Kulterkampf* pursued by Bismarck just after the nation's unification.<sup>118</sup> However, historian Stan Landry argues that the formation of the German nation, even after the implementation and subsequently failure of the *Kulterkampf*, represented a unifying force that allowed for a growing rapprochement in the confessional divide between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>119</sup> The nationalist naval aspirations that gathered wide support among the people of Germany provided the opportunity for the strengthening the sense of unity between the nation's two main sects. Under the leadership of Lieber, the Centre Party had moved towards supporting national issues like a strong naval policy, especially so that Catholics could bridge the gap with both Protestants and secular Liberals alike.<sup>120</sup> Even though the Centre Party's base was organized strictly along confessional and religious lines, Lieber wanted to effectively operate as a governmental party in order to demonstrate the ability of Catholics to be patriotic and not strictly tied to the politics of the Vatican.<sup>121</sup> Lieber's goals were not unrealistic, as the nation's Catholics had become

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<sup>113</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 306.

<sup>114</sup> Eley, "Reshaping the German Right," p. 183.

<sup>115</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 35.

<sup>116</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 141.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141 - 142.

<sup>119</sup> Stan M. Landry, *Ecumenism, Memory, & German Nationalism: 1817-1917* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. xvi.

<sup>120</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 142.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

increasingly more connected to their national responsibilities.<sup>122</sup> This only became apparent as the legacies of the *Kulterkampf* began to fade away, and once the country's leaders had become increasingly more tolerant, but not totally accepting, of their Catholic citizens.<sup>123</sup> However, this does not mean to suggest that all Catholics supported imperial ambitions, as Kelly argues: "No amount of persuasion could have won the Bavarians [Catholics] for the navy bills."<sup>124</sup> Catholics from the interior, and those of Polish heritage, did not support the large financial cost that accompanied the plans for naval expansion, especially when the navy's primary function was directed towards expanding German imperialist aspirations.<sup>125</sup> However, as historian Helmut Smith argues, even though some portions of the Centre Party did have concerns over the immense cost associated with the navy bills, ultimately the party's leadership and the majority of its members supported the rise of Germany's Navy "not out of opportunism but out of conviction."<sup>126</sup>

Kelly points out the ironic fact that the Centre Party was the only true national party within the Reichstag, because unlike the other parties, its membership crossed all class lines within the country.<sup>127</sup> Tirpitz had recognized this and was bent on utilizing the great representation that the party held within the Reichstag in order to counter the hardnosed Social Democrats and the faltering Liberal's over the naval issue.<sup>128</sup> Smith emphasizes this point by quoting Tirpitz' who said: "What we want to achieve [passing the navy laws] can only be achieved with the help of the Centre."<sup>129</sup> One of the most significant ways that Tirpitz was able to achieve this support was through encouraging the membership of Catholics in the nation's main naval lobbying group, the *Deutscher Flottenverein*, as it was the only organization that bridged the country's confessional divisions.<sup>130</sup> Smith describes how the *Flottenverein*, "which set out to educate Germans of all classes and confessions on the necessity of a strong fleet, counted significant numbers of Catholics among its members."<sup>131</sup> That being said, the *Flottenverein* was not only successful in integrating Catholics into national politics, but it also became immensely popular among other parts of the population and greatly influenced

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<sup>122</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 306.

<sup>123</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, pp. 141-2, 276.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>126</sup> Helmut W. Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>127</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 141.

<sup>128</sup> Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, p. 46.

<sup>129</sup> Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*, p. 120.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Germany's pursuit of a large naval fleet.

### **Organized Nationalism: The *Deutscher Flottenverein***

Nationalism did not have to be artificially stimulated, presented to the Reichstag and then channeled into the fleet laws, since it already existed.<sup>132</sup> However, to achieve the massive fleet that Tirpitz envisioned there had to be strong organization to rally nationalist opinion in the direction of the navy. The institution that channeled preexisting nationalist views towards the navy was the *Flottenverein*, which was founded in 1898 soon after the first navy law was passed.<sup>133</sup> The *Flottenverein* was presented as a non-political group but it was actually organized by the Kaiser, and as historian Archibald Hurd has argued, this initiative was undertaken at the suggestion of Tirpitz.<sup>134</sup> The organization's leadership also happened to include the Krupp family, who ran the largest steel company in the nation, the same steel that would be used to build the ships for which the *Flottenverein* advocated.<sup>135</sup> But even if the *Flottenverein* was founded and run by people who would gain the most from its success, it still managed to muster great support from the nation as a whole. However, the *Flottenverein* was not the first major contributor to the spread of nationalism within Germany as its predecessor, the Pan-German League, had provided the original paradigm.

The founding ideals of the Pan-German League were based on "invigorating the German-national attitude, in order to awaken and cultivate the awareness of German culture and race."<sup>136</sup> It had given itself a fundamental task: "preserve German ethnicity, to fight against all forces that impeded national development, and to actively promote policy that pursued German interests throughout the world, especially a continuation of the German colonial movement to the point where it produces practical results."<sup>137</sup> These were principals later shared with other nationalist groups, such as the *Flottenverein*, and such goals were deeply embedded within the wider population. The pursuit of Germany's fleet expansion program under Tirpitz was an agenda that the Pan-German league had been keen to support in the lead

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<sup>132</sup> Weir, *Building the Kaiser's Navy*, p. 307.

<sup>133</sup> Geoff Eley, "Reshaping the Right: Radical Nationalism and the German Navy League: 1898-1908" *The Historical Journal* 21, 2: p. 330.

<sup>134</sup> Archibald Hurd & Henry Castle, *German Sea-Power: Its Rise, Progress and Economic Basis* (Westport, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1971), p. 208.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>136</sup> Alfred Kruck, *Die Geschichte des Alldeutschen Verbandes 1890-1939. The History of the Pan-German League 1890-1939.* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1954), p. 10; *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington. DC) [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

up to the first navy bill of 1897-8.<sup>138</sup> Eley argues that the German Naval Office was at first hesitant to gain “assistance from an outside organization in order to pressure the legitimate channels of the parties and the Reichstag.”<sup>139</sup> However, the successful passing of the first navy bill was regarded as justification for the support of extra-parliamentary movements, as their lobbying had effectively galvanized the country in support of the navy.<sup>140</sup> The great scale of nationalist support directed towards the navy bill gave rise to a narrowed focus on its goals, and this ultimately led to the development of a specifically navy-focused agitation group, the *Flottenverein*.<sup>141</sup> The success of political agitation during the passing of first navy bill meant that Conservative elites, leaders of industry and the navy saw an opportunity to develop and support a group that was strictly aimed at achieving the needs of the German Navy.<sup>142</sup> The newly founded *Flottenverein* was designed to bridge all the gaps within German society that groups like the Pan-German League were fundamentally unable to do, which meant the *Flottenverein* was better equipped to take on the naval issue.<sup>143</sup>

The main intention of the *Flottenverein*, as Eley describes it,

Was to supply an ideological bond [over the naval idea] stronger than party, confessional or social divisions within the nation, which could restore the national spirit of 1870-1. Above all, it was to reach down into the working class, the masses or the fourth estate and win them back from the pernicious, anti-national influence of internationalist Social Democracy.<sup>144</sup>

In other words, the success of the *Flottenverein* was not strictly limited to the goal of supporting the expansion of the navy, but instead its effectiveness was judged by its ability to cross social boundaries that had traditionally divided people. Eley states that “both moderates and radicals saw the *Flottenverein* as a showpiece of national concord between worker and prince, between Right and Left, North and South, a popular movement based on neither class, party, confession nor interest, but on the nation as a whole.”<sup>145</sup> The group’s proficiency in mobilizing support for the naval cause was primarily due to its ability to produce effective propaganda that coincided with the navy’s own efforts.

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<sup>138</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, pp. 70 & 71.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>142</sup> Eley, “Reshaping the Right,” pp. 329 & 330.

<sup>143</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 200.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

The mission statement of the *Flottenverein* describes how the group wished to “awaken, cultivate, and strengthen the interests of the German people for the importance and functions of the fleet.”<sup>146</sup> In order to achieve these goals the *Flottenverein* pursued a multitude of effective propaganda strategies that became widely popular among the German population. The *Flottenverein* and the navy’s own News Office shared similar agendas in promoting the importance and responsibilities of the navy by “way of speech, the written word, and pictures.”<sup>147</sup> The technical journal, *Marine-Rundschau*, which had limited sales, was turned into a popular magazine, *Die Flotte*, which published nearly 350,000 copies monthly.<sup>148</sup> The British press criticized the success of the magazine by claiming that it was unable to generate profits due to its high production costs.<sup>149</sup> However, the magazine was not only reserved for members of the *Flottenverein*, but it also found popularity within many sections of society.<sup>150</sup> The *Flottenverein* also glorified naval history books, with a special focus on what they considered the “Bible of the Navy,” ie., Mahan’s work on naval doctrine, as discussed previously in the paper.<sup>151</sup> The Kaiser issued a decree that all officers in the navy had to read Mahan’s book, but it was the *Flottenverein* that made it popular amongst Germans outside the navy.<sup>152</sup> As was so often the case, the lobbyists and government were not attempting to bamboozle the public, but sharing knowledge about something they considered geopolitically important, and which they were concurrently using to indoctrinate officers within the navy itself. Kelly points out that even the German Army published articles in their journal, the *Militar-Wochenblatt*, which argued for the development of a stronger battle fleet because it would “reduce the burden of coastal defense off the army and prevent a blockade so that the army could be fed in wartime.”<sup>153</sup> The German Army had remained practically dormant for over a decade while the navy gained command of over one-third of the military budget, but this environment had changed by 1912 as faltering naval expansion turned the public’s interest back towards the needs of the army.<sup>154</sup>

The *Flottenverein* also produced material goods designed to spread awareness of the naval cause. Clothing that resembled German naval uniforms, just like that of the Kaiser’s attire,

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<sup>146</sup> Archibald Hurd & Henry Castle, *German Sea-Power: Its Rise, Progress and Economic Basis* (Westport, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1971), p. 209.

<sup>147</sup> August von Heeringen, “Excerpt from the memorandum regarding the tasks and working methods of the News Office,” (September 24, 1900). *Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv*, RM 3/9551, *German History in Documents and Images*, (Washington: German Historical Institute), [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).

<sup>148</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 40.

<sup>149</sup> “The German Navy League,” *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Bedfordshire, pp. 3, 24 May 1907, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>150</sup> Hurd & Castle, *German Sea-Power*, p. 210.

<sup>151</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 40.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40 - 41.

<sup>153</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 187.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

became a vogue for children.<sup>155</sup> This fashion trend had gained global popularity during this era, as originally made famous by a child-sized Royal Navy ratings uniform that was designed for the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward in 1864.<sup>156</sup> Similar examples can be seen from *Flottenverein* postcards, such as one from 1911, which depicts a child wearing a uniform of the German Navy along with a painting of the *S.M.S Bayern*, a warship that was to be built as a result of the navy bills.<sup>157</sup> The *Flottenverein* would have strategically picked the *Bayern* for such a postcard because the warship was named after one of Germany's most southern and inland regions, which also happened to be home to a large population of German Catholics. It was a great propaganda opportunity for the *Flottenverein* to demonstrate that the navy was truly a national organization that appreciated even sections of Germany far from the sea. The *Flottenverein* also made, and promoted the sale of, naval-themed cigarette boxes, chocolate-bar wrappers, beer mugs and an assortment of toys.<sup>158</sup> Examples of these items can be seen from the relics of period that the Imperial War Museum in London has collected.<sup>159</sup> Pieces like these are great examples of how the *Flottenverein* and the navy were able to connect with the average German citizen. Such common items, used on a daily basis, cultivated a consistent awareness of the navy.

However, does this mean that the average German citizen who bought and used *Flottenverein* merchandise was constantly thinking about the politics surrounding the navy? Historian Michael Billig has described nationalism as a force that is in most cases just a subliminal phenomenon that may only be aroused during particular moments and significant events.<sup>160</sup> The symbols of nationalism that surrounded the German people were interconnected with their everyday lives even if they did not overtly recognize this ubiquity. Perhaps the constant usage of *Flottenverein* merchandise did not consistently or openly incite thoughts of nationalism or support of the navy, but plain use of such items was in itself a subtle form of nationalism. The state flag of a nation is not always perceived by the average citizen, but its presence is never removed from a person's peripheral view, and this means that when the country is faced with a national issue, such as naval expansion or the threat of war, the significance of the 'flapping' flag is then noticed.<sup>161</sup>

One of the *Flottenverein's* most significant contributions towards the propaganda

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<sup>155</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 40.

<sup>156</sup> Child's sailor suit made for Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, 1846, *National Maritime Museum*, Greenwich, London, ([www.rmg.co.uk/file/8129](http://www.rmg.co.uk/file/8129))

<sup>157</sup> "S.M.S Bayern Postcard," 1911, *House of Bavarian History*, Image Archive, Augsburg, ([www.hdbg.de](http://www.hdbg.de))

<sup>158</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 187.

<sup>159</sup> "German Glass and Cigarette Tin," EPH 9365 & EPH 5185, *Imperial War Museum*, London, ([www.iwm.uk](http://www.iwm.uk))

<sup>160</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

campaign for naval expansion was the organization of events that coordinated the usage of naval vessels for public showings.<sup>162</sup> The strategy of utilizing the navy resulted from the poor public response to the lobbying group's initial open events, which as historian Martin Loiperdinger argues, "only attracted the local dignitaries who already believed in naval expansion."<sup>163</sup> In response, prominent members of the *Flottenverein* suggested to Tirpitz that the navy should be used as the primary instrument of propaganda. The *Flottenverein*, it was thought, would thereby be better equipped to achieve its goal of "persuading a nation of landlubbers to expand a fleet for the general purposes of enhancing and defending its world position."<sup>164</sup> The coordination of events that included the navy was ultimately successful in increasing the size of the *Flottenverein*'s membership, as it had been effective at establishing connections with ordinary Germans who might otherwise have not shown any enthusiasm for naval expansion.<sup>165</sup> Note, for example, the "Rhine and its Relations with the Sea" event of 1900, which included the sailing of 100 torpedo boats that travelled to all the major cities along the Rhine River.<sup>166</sup> These events featured music, singing, one-act entertainments, dances and a late-night ball that over 4,000 people attended.<sup>167</sup> This event was obviously directed towards the Rhineland's Catholic population, which was largely in agreement with the Centre Party's support for the navy as long as "they got something in return" for their support.<sup>168</sup> These methods of organizing mass support for the navy effectively translated into positive support from the German people, who in turn influenced the stance of their deputies in the Reichstag.

Other events included speeches by the *Flottenprofessoren* (Fleet Professors), who were prominent German intellectuals and professors from German universities.<sup>169</sup> One of the key points of discussion was on the nation's common "dislike and envy of the British, as it provided good slogan material throughout the country, which could be translated into money and support in the Reichstag."<sup>170</sup> One of the most popular speakers from the *Flottenprofessoren* was the Chairman of the History Department at the University of Berlin, Heinrich von Treitschke.<sup>171</sup> MacMillan points out that Treitschke's "multi-volume history of Germany, had influenced a whole generation of Germany's leaders to take pride in the great German past and in the

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<sup>162</sup> Martin Loiperdinger, "The Beginnings of German Film Propaganda: The Navy League as traveling exhibitor, 1901-1907" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22, No.3 (2002): p. 306.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>164</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 155.

<sup>165</sup> Loiperdinger. "The Beginnings of German Film Propaganda," p. 107.

<sup>166</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 88.

<sup>167</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 134.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>169</sup> Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics*, p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>171</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry*, p. 16.

extraordinary achievements of Prussia in building the German state.”<sup>172</sup> Members of the *Flottenprofessoren* were considered the “intellectual fathers of the new German nationalism” and held great sway over the opinions of the nation’s leadership and general public.<sup>173</sup> Treitschke has been called the “prophet of the national idea” and played a key role in cultivating the strong German nationalist beliefs echoed by Tirpitz.<sup>174</sup> Historian Peter Padfield argues that the members of the *Flottenprofessoren* were true supporters of ardent nationalism and strongly believed in the importance of the navy’s duty in augmenting national power.<sup>175</sup> Support from the nation’s popular scholars spread the message of the navy across many levels of German society and was an effective form of lobbying for the *Flottenverein*.

The *Flottenverein* became the largest agitation group within Germany, and the largest one in the world, at least amongst those that actively supported a navalist cause. And again, it is important to note that this activism translated into the passing of naval legislation.<sup>176</sup> This goal was achieved through the *Flottenverein*’s effective persuasion of the German people and the consequent political influence that helped enact the laws put forth by Tirpitz. However, ten years after the founding of the *Flottenverein*, their public/media events and propaganda began to lose their appeal as the agenda set out by Tirpitz began to unravel. Political and military phenomena that were beyond his control, such as the rise of extremist movements, political change, and the reemergence of the army, begun to overshadow the needs of the navy. Much of this transformation of positive support into radical discontent was caused by the worsening antagonism with Britain. The British were not willing to sit idly by while the Germans pursued a naval-building agenda that threatened their ocean-going supremacy. Just as the *Flottenverein* shaped public opinion over the naval issue in Germany, the British press had a similar effect in the United Kingdom.

### **The British Press and the Threat of Germany’s Nationalist Navy**

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Jack Fisher, was quoted as saying that, “the [British] Empire floats on the Royal Navy,” so it is not surprising that the expansion of the Germany Navy had been negatively perceived by the British as a threat to their ocean-going supremacy.<sup>177</sup> The naval

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<sup>172</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 88.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 101.

<sup>175</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry*, p. 16.

<sup>176</sup> Eley, “Reshaping the Right,” p. 330.

<sup>177</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 114.

arms race that resulted from Germany's fleet expansion has been well documented within the historiography of this period, but the antagonism went well beyond the ship-for-ship build-off.<sup>178</sup> The British press was a very significant actor in acknowledging and exposing the threat that Germany's naval fleet posed to the interests of the British Empire. MacMillan argues that British unease towards Germany's Navy first started as a result of the naval laws that were passed through the Reichstag in 1897 and 1900.<sup>179</sup> In response to the first naval law, the *Saturday Review* in London posted a vehemently anti-German article that notoriously ended with the quote "*Germania esse delendam* [Germany must be destroyed]."<sup>180</sup> The press would continue to go so far as to circulate stories that envisioned a German invasion of the British homeland, which if a reality, would have been ultimately provided by the increasingly capable German Navy.<sup>181</sup> Along with the influence of the press, invasion literature became popular in England at this time, as demonstrated by the popular book *The Great War in England of 1897*, in which a German naval armada travels across the English Channel and lands soldiers upon the coastlines of Britain.<sup>182</sup> The Germans took keen interest in what was being written in the British press, as they understood the significant power that the press held over British public opinion. In response, the Germans attempted to buy support and publish a German-friendly paper, but this foray was ultimately a failure as they were unable to subsidize any willing British papers.<sup>183</sup> MacMillan points out that this move by Germany, once news of it reached the public, only further perpetuated British suspicions.<sup>184</sup>

In response to the threat posed by the spread of German nationalism and naval expansion, the British press presented two approaches to the public, one focused on criticizing the German Navy and the public opinion behind it, and another that downplayed the same threat, rather emphasizing confidence in the capabilities of the Royal Navy. The British press was greatly influenced by the political events, as Liberals and Conservatives battled over issues regarding the German Navy.<sup>185</sup> Both sides of the political spectrum wished to address the threat of the German Navy, much like the press wanted to do, but it was largely the Conservatives who pursued the expansion of Britain's own fleet as a response.<sup>186</sup> Conservative papers perpetuated the threat that the German Navy posed, and in turn their political counterparts pressed the Liberal leadership, which largely opposed expansion of the Royal Navy, to

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<sup>178</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 327.

<sup>179</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 113.

<sup>180</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 136.

<sup>181</sup> MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, p. 504.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112 - 113.

<sup>185</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, pp. 263 - 264.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 291.

challenge Germany.<sup>187</sup>

That being said, much of the attention by the press was directed towards the *Flottenverein* and not just the navy, since it was suggested that the group's overheated nationalism was the prime force behind Germany's naval expansion.<sup>188</sup> The German public was described as being "attacked by navy fever," which was being consistently perpetuated by effective *Flottenverein* propaganda.<sup>189</sup> The *Flottenverein* was also presented in comparison to Britain's own Navy League, which the press blatantly criticized for being outnumbered by its German counterpart, the latter having almost fifty-times as many members.<sup>190</sup> The British press consistently utilized the *Flottenverein's* membership numbers and every year the group's annual report was presented to the British public.<sup>191</sup> Aside from statistics on membership, the British press also released information regarding the financial standings of the *Flottenverein*, which only further seemed to demonstrate the tangible threat posed by the group.<sup>192</sup> These facts suggest that the British print media magnified the threat of Germany's naval expansion by showing that it had mass public support and was backed by a lobbying organization with a strong financial standing. When compared to the minuscule numbers in Britain's own naval league, the *Flottenverein's* healthy membership figures could only have created greater fear in the minds of the British public.

However, not all the Germanophobe press in Britain was focused on inciting fear, but also sought to persuade the British people to convince their own nation's leaders in taking action against the German threat. Much of this persuasion came in the form of criticism of the British leadership and their own country's navy. This approach was demonstrated by the article "A Rude Awakening" in the *Dundee Courier*, in which criticism was directed at comments made by the First Sea Lord and the First Civil Lord of Britain, who both assured Britons that the "state of the navy was fine."<sup>193</sup> Even though it appears that Britain's leadership was only attempting to quell fears generated by the German Navy, the author of the article states that, "those who

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-5, 293.

<sup>188</sup> "A Rude Awakening," *Dundee Courier*, Angus, p. 4, 18 December 1909, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>190</sup> Charles Whitby, "Is England in Danger?" *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, Somerset, p. 2, 17 February 1910, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>191</sup> "The German Navy League," *Morning Post*, London, p. 5, 27 December 1898, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>192</sup> "The German Navy League," *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Bedfordshire, p. 3, 24 May 1907, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>193</sup> "A Rude Awakening," *Dundee Courier*, Angus, p. 4, 18 December 1909, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

accepted these assurances with unquestioning faith will have a rude awakening.”<sup>194</sup> The increasingly hostile Anglo-German relationship was blamed not only on the *Flottenverein's* encouragement of naval policies in Germany, but on Britain’s perceived inability to effectively counter this threat.<sup>195</sup> However, not all the British press focused on the menace of the Germany Navy, but instead some journals actually undercut the seriousness of any such threat.

In 1905, the *Flottenverein's* leadership went through a period of change that resulted in a loss of exclusive control by conservatives, large industrialists and their allies.<sup>196</sup> Eley suggests that the changes within the *Flottenverein* were meant to redirect the group from being an “agitation team for heavy industry and government,” especially so that it could focus instead on its connection with the average German.<sup>197</sup> This issue was exacerbated by internal divisions caused by conservative leaders who did not agree with the policy of cultivating Catholic membership within the group, seeing the latter as “nationally unreliable.”<sup>198</sup> The intensity of anti-Catholic remarks made by a key *Flottenverein* leader resulted with the intervention of the Kaiser, who dropped the member from his position of responsibility within the organization.<sup>199</sup> The British press was able to capitalize on these events by presenting them as examples of German weakness and suggesting that the threat posed by the *Flottenverein* was becoming less serious.<sup>200</sup> In an article titled, “German Navy League in Disgrace,” one newspaper slammed the *Flottenverein* for being such an ineffective agitation group that had become the subject of open criticism by the Reichstag, Tirpitz and even the Kaiser himself.<sup>201</sup> Tirpitz was described as being “so lukewarm in his defence of the League that his actions were rather an endorsement of the criticism than a refutation.”<sup>202</sup> The historical reality of the events in 1905 were not as damaging as the British press described, as the change in the *Flottenverein's* leadership was actually quite effective in transforming the group into a popular movement based on the principals of “free association for nationally-minded German men friendly to the fleet.”<sup>203</sup> That being said, it is likely that the average Briton citizen would not have known this fact, but instead would have been influenced only by news of the League’s disgrace. Other articles in the British press

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>195</sup> “German Naval Ambition,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Greater Manchester, p. 10, 10 May 1905 ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>196</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 91.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*, pp. 150 - 151.

<sup>199</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 276.

<sup>200</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 85.

<sup>201</sup> “German Navy League in Disgrace,” *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Derbyshire, p. 2, 19 May 1905, ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk))

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>203</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 91.

presented strong criticism of the German Navy itself, especially by comparing its record to the Royal Navy's long-standing history of achievements. In an article on the annual statistics of the *Flottenverein*, a comment at the end of the story criticized the German Navy, as the author wrote: "the German fleet needed to first accomplish some historical deed before it is immortalized in the school history books."<sup>204</sup> Some of the British press would go as far as to describe the threat posed by Germany's Navy as "groundless," and to suggest that describing it in any other manner was fear mongering.<sup>205</sup>

It is fair to say that the spread of nationalism in Germany, the creation of the *Flottenverein* and the expansion of the navy constituted a legitimate threat to the British people. Britain's press was effective in perpetuating knowledge of this threat, as the stories that it published ultimately influenced the British leadership and their own country's naval nationalists to accept the challenge of a naval arms race.<sup>206</sup> Whether the press was simply reporting on Germany's ship building progress, or lambasting their own government's perceived inability to counter the German threat, the British press was effective in swaying public opinion to take these events seriously.<sup>207</sup>

### Radical Nationalism and the Radical Failure

By 1914, the *Flottenverein* had a membership base of over 1.1 million, and since its founding in 1897, it had helped to pass every law that went through the Reichstag in support of the navy.<sup>208</sup> However, the shipbuilding program under Tirpitz ultimately failed to reach its goals. This failure was solidified when Germany was ultimately beat by Britain once the two powers engaged in a ship-for-ship arms race, which resulted in the fleet's internment at anchor for most of World War I and its subsequent destruction after the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>209</sup> The circumstances that led to these outcomes derived from fiscal restrains that caused the

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<sup>204</sup> "The German Navy League," *Morning Post*, p. 5.

<sup>205</sup> "The German Natt," *Portsmouth Evening News*, Hampshire, p. 6, 06 May 1905, ([www.britishnewsarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewsarchive.co.uk))

<sup>206</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, pp. 293, 296.

<sup>207</sup> "Alarmed Germany: Demand for More Warships: Capital for Navy League" *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Greater Manchester, p. 7, 09 February 1905, ([www.britishnewsarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewsarchive.co.uk))

<sup>208</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 40.

<sup>209</sup> Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, p. 149.

moderation of Tirpitz's policies, as well as the rise of a brand of radical nationalism that split the objectives of the *Flottenverein*, plus the overall consequences of provoking the Royal Navy.<sup>210</sup>

As Germany ramped up its production of naval vessels, the Royal Navy in turn responded by building twice as many ships, as it feared losing its dominant control over the seas. Being an island nation that was supplied by its overseas colonies, the confrontation with Germany was not an arms race that Britain could afford to lose, and for Germany, it was an impossible one to win. One of the key reasons why German was not able to effectively challenge Britain was due to financial restraints that stemmed from the nation's system of taxation. The German nation-state in which the navalists invested such hope was actually fiscally weak, and the German Government had to borrow in order to launch and continue its major ship-building program. Kelly describes how "Article 70 of the Constitution restricted the right of direct taxation to the federal states," and how this fiscal policy meant the Germany was financially unable to pursue a naval race with Britain.<sup>211</sup> In other words, the system of taxation was constitutionally incapable of providing the state with sufficient finances to fund "extradordating expenditures," such as expansion of the naval fleet.<sup>212</sup> This policy was originated by Bismarck in order to prevent the state from having the ability to threaten the wealth and power of conservative elites.<sup>213</sup> The constitution went as far as to ensure that even the Emperor had to "obtain the consent of the Estates to the levying of any direct taxes, to the imposition of any new indirect duties, or to the increasing or alteration of those already existing."<sup>214</sup> Kelly argues that the state's financial dilemma left Tirpitz without enough resources to effectively expand the fleet in competition with Britain, and hence he was forced to moderate his naval policies. This late-sprouting temperance led to disenchantment from the very navalists whom Tirpitz had originally encouraged.<sup>215</sup>

In his memoirs, Tirpitz admits that a large increase in Germany's naval power was pursued "to meet British threats of war and, to teach the English a lesson in politics."<sup>216</sup> Tirpitz intentionally kept the intention of war with Britain out of official naval policy, as he knew such a message was politically impossible to present in the Reichstag.<sup>217</sup> It became a classic case of

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<sup>210</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 286.

<sup>211</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 169.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Functions and Attributes of the Assembly of the Estates, Article 3, *Constitution of the German Empire* (April 16, 1871), *German History in Documents and Images*, (German Historical Institute: Washington. DC)

<sup>215</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 167.

<sup>216</sup> Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, p. 264.

<sup>217</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 37.

'be careful of what you wish for,' since Britain, once challenged, had no alternative but to respond and beat back Germany's naval threat. Tirpitz feared nothing more than war, as an all-out war with Britain meant that his naval building strategy would be sidelined indefinitely, something he wanted to avoid at all costs.<sup>218</sup> Once Britain was provoked, Tirpitz attempted to tone down the hoopla around the naval laws, but this only infuriated the Kaiser and the members of the *Flottenverein*.<sup>219</sup> Tirpitz had previously gone as far as to threaten resignation in order to get his laws passed in the Reichstag, but due to his fear of war, he was forced to back away from his ambitious plans.<sup>220</sup> However, retreating from a policy that was so stridently pursued for close to a decade was not acceptable to the radical nationalists who had massed their support under the banner of the *Flottenverein*. This hesitancy caused not only great criticism of Tirpitz, but also began to break apart the membership of the *Flottenverein*.<sup>221</sup>

By 1908, the radical nationalists had begun to vent their frustration with Tirpitz, who was restricting naval budgets, and there as unhappiness about his inability to close the gap with Britain's shipbuilding program.<sup>222</sup> Historian Ivo Nikolai Lambi points out that the *Flottenverein* began falling out with the officer corps of the navy as early as 1905, due to its criticism of Tirpitz in handling the naval competition with Britain.<sup>223</sup> Kelly argues that Tirpitz "was never very clear as to when the day would come when completion of a navy, supposedly built to support Germany's pursuit of *Weltpolitik*, would finally allow Germany to practice *Weltpolitik*."<sup>224</sup> The debate within the *Flottenverein* over Tirpitz demonstrated that the non-political group was in fact quite political, and it was the radical right-wing sections of the organization that reduced its abilities to function in the way that was originally intended. Eley argues that the *Flottenverein* "gradually incorporated attitudes into a larger offensive against the political establishment as a whole, whom they accused of debilitation caution, social elitism, blindness to Germany's national needs and a refusal to obey the dictates of the new mass politics."<sup>225</sup> The *Flottenverein* was designed to function at a level beyond the parliamentarianism of the Reichstag, but it was not able to continue in this fashion after Tirpitz began to show moderation.<sup>226</sup> Radical nationalist groups within the *Flottenverein* were fueled by the inflexibility of the existing political parties,

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<sup>218</sup> Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics*, p. 21.

<sup>219</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 373.

<sup>220</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 59.

<sup>221</sup> Eley, "Reshaping the Right," p. 338.

<sup>222</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 61.

<sup>223</sup> Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, p. 275.

<sup>224</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 462.

<sup>225</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 190.

<sup>226</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 373.

which negated much of the group's effectiveness.<sup>227</sup>

By 1909, it was clear that Germany had lost the arms race with Britain, and along with it came the introduction of greater threats to the nation. A new chancellor was appointed: Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, and there was a new focus upon the army, as land-based threats returned as a security priority.<sup>228</sup> Germany's nationalists had also shifted towards supporting the new Army Bill of 1913, as threats of a ground war with the Reich's continental neighbours were on the rise.<sup>229</sup> Tirpitz would continue to pass naval laws as late as 1912, but his goals for the navy were lost, along with the importance of the *Flottenverein*.<sup>230</sup>

The nationalist movement, which drove the state to spend over one billion Reichsmark between 1897 and 1914, began losing popularity as radical sentiment from within the *Flottenverein* had led Tirpitz to direct an arms race with the largest sea power in the world.<sup>231</sup> Political opposition had also gained support during this period, and as historian Raffael Scheck argues, the failures of nationalist policy had given rise to the Social Democrat Party (SDP), a party that the Kaiser, Tirpitz and the nationalists all hated and feared.<sup>232</sup> Kelly argues that the SDP, which had always represented the main political opposition to *Weltpolitik* and the nationalist agenda, viewed these policies and naval expansion to be "imperialistic saber rattling."<sup>233</sup> The policy failures in the lead up to war meant that support for the SDP grew beyond its core membership, which ultimately hurt the nationalist agenda in the Reichstag.<sup>234</sup>

The nationalism that built the German Navy also came close to forcing armed conflict with an opposing force that it would not have been able to beat. In addition, once nationalist sentiment turned in a radical direction, it tore apart the group it had founded, and subsequently betrayed the leaders who had encouraged it. Nationalism was the force that built the Germany Navy, but it was also the reason why it was unsuccessful in producing the grand fleet that Tirpitz and the Kaiser dreamed of building. However, it must be noted that there were other forces within Germany that opposed the common nationalist sentiment of the era. Pacifist groups were also operating during this time period, and historian Roger Chickering points out that pacifists blamed the navy for the growth of Anglo-German tension.<sup>235</sup> Chickering argues

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<sup>227</sup> Eley, "Reshaping the Right," p. 338.

<sup>228</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 61.

<sup>229</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, pp. 345, 351.

<sup>230</sup> Herwig, *Luxury Fleet*, p. 61.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>233</sup> Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy*, p. 231.

<sup>234</sup> Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>235</sup> Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892-1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 311.

that pacifists believed that the naval policy, which led to an arms race with Britain, was based on a “remediable tactical error.”<sup>236</sup> They thought that Tirpitz should have known that an aggressive fleet construction program would provoke Britain into an arms race. This opinion is echoed by Kelly who argued that Tirpitz was “bureaucratically inflexible and the contributor to the ineptitude and recklessness of Reich diplomacy as he did nothing to head off war in 1914.” Whether or not the opinions of the pacifists are supported by historical hindsight, it still suggests that nationalism did not influence the thinking of all Germans. However, nationalism truly outweighed all other forms of public sentiment during this time period, so much so that the most radical forms of the ideology created the most dramatic impacts on the outcome of German naval policy.

## Conclusion

The German Navy prior to World War I was truly a nationalist organization, not only in its make up but also in the connection that it had with nationalism within the country. The navy grew as a separate entity from that of the army, and developed its own ranks from the liberal middle class section of society. Where the army was steeped in Prussian tradition, the navy was able to create itself as a strictly German organization. This meant that the navy truly represented a solidifying sense of German national identity by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The same national sentiment that supported this naval force would rally behind the Kaiser and Tirpitz in furthering the development of their fleet with great construction laws. National support for the navy became organized and developed under the *Flottenverein*, which rallied and pressed the Reichstag and other influential policy-makers to support the navy’s demands. When the ambitious fleet construction plans provoked Britain, the nationalists pressed Tirpitz to be more aggressive and ridiculed him when he showed moderation. This situation gave rise to radical nationalism, which tore apart the *Flottenverein*, thus making their cause less appealing to policy-makers. As the nature of the political scene and the sense of strategic threats began to shift, the nationalists in support of the navy were ineffective in bringing focus back to their cause. It was in 1914 that Tirpitz’s greatest fear was realized: the start of the Great War derailed any further plans that he had for the development of Germany’s great fleet. It was nationalism that founded the German Navy, it would be nationalism that pushed for its growth, and ultimately it would be nationalism that failed in achieving Germany’s goals of a great fleet expansion and overseas domination.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

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