***Germany and Sea Power in the 20th Century***

**Michael Epkenhans**

I

Today sea power, or to be more precise, naval power is just as much one of the most important prerequisites of political, social, and economic stability in Germany as it is in the whole West. The threats of terrorism and piracy have highlighted the vulnerability of Western Society in every respect. In a globalized world, without safe passage of food and goods these societies would suffer heavy losses threatening the proper working of highly industrialized societies dependent upon the timely supply of raw materials or spare parts as well as the safe passage of manufactured goods and food. Today, “*Mission Atalanta*” and “*Operation Enduring Freedom*” try to defend the lifelines of the West by fighting both piracy and terrorism. The German Navy plays an important part in these operations, but it took Germany a long way to get there.

Unlike the history of the other Western powers, the history of Germany and sea power is – at least as far as the first half of the 20th century is concerned – a history of failure and seminal disaster. One of the main reasons for this judgment is that Germany developed a concept of world and sea power, which eventually contributed to the tensions leading to the outbreak of World War I.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the last decades of the 19th century Germany’s political and naval leadership decided to revolutionize the international system in order to bequeath Britain as the world’s leading power. Since sea power was the main pillar of Britain’s power, they tried to follow her example by building up a powerful fleet, which, in the end, would be able to challenge her successfully. With her battle fleet and her victories in classical battles she had established a “Pax Britannica”, which in return had helped to build up a huge empire, to develop her industries and commerce, and to keep up political and social stability at home. From the German point of view, Britain, however, was on the decline, and, just as much as she had dominated the 19th century, her new rival wanted to become the world’s leading power in the 20th century.

The architect of this fleet was Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz.[[2]](#footnote-2) From 1897 onwards he built up a fleet consisting of 60 capital ships, 40 Light cruisers, 144 destroyers, and 72 submarines. The strategic purpose of this fleet was, however, not power projection. For lack of bases, this was out of the question. Instead, Tirpitz’s dagger-at-the-throat-strategy (Paul Kennedy) aimed at forcing Britain either to yield to Germany’s demands in the course of a cold war or to inflict so heavy losses upon its fleet in the wet triangle around Heligoland in a hot war that Germany would nevertheless be the victor, for her rival would give in for fear of losing her empire.

As we all know this strategy failed completely. The reason for this is very simple. The assumption that Britain could not out-build the Imperial Navy for lack of both finances as well as of men to man the vessels was a prerequisite of Tirpitz’s progamme. This assumption, however, soon proved wrong. In 1908/09 the British Admiralty took up the gauntlet which Tirpitz had thrown into its face by ordering not only four, but even eight new vessels of the “*Dreadnought*”-type, thus effectively doubling Germany’s annual building-rate at that time. More importantly, the Admiralty soon accepted the offer of some of Britain’s colonies and dominions to share the financial burden of their mother country to defend the empire.

That is, in short, why Canada suddenly attracted the attention of German naval politicians on the eve of the Great War.

II

Since the turn of the century German cruisers stationed on Germany’s American Station as it was called had paid regular visits to Canadian ports on their annual cruises through the Western hemisphere. Calling at Halifax, Quebec, or St. John they had met with the local authorities or taken part in local festivities for some reason or another. However, obviously just in case, they had also taken a close look at harbor defences as well as riverine conditions as a number of secret photographs and charts in the Admiral Staff papers prove.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The young Royal Canadian Navy itself was regarded as a negligible quantity. Its only cruiser, former HMS “*Niobe*”, seemed in a poor condition as the captain of SMS “*Bremen*” reported in 1912; the number of men serving was small, and the service itself was obviously not very attractive to young Canadians. In 1912, many men simply deserted for various reasons.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This appraisal of the deficiencies of the Royal Canadian Navy, however, was, in 1912, questioned by the proposal of the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, to support the Royal Navy by offering to pay for the building of three capital ships in Britain.[[5]](#footnote-5) From the German point of view this offer was made at a very critical moment. In spring 1912, Tirpitz had once again succeeded in enlarging the German High Seas Fleet. After heavy infighting, parliament, the *Reichstag*, had passed another supplementary bill providing for three more capital ships in the years ahead. Thus Tirpitz would be able to stabilize the ratio of an annual construction-rate of three ships as well as to reach his final aim of building a fleet, which consisted of sixty capital ships. In his eyes Britain, in the long run, would not be able to build and man a fleet, which was more than a third larger than the German fleet. Thus, and this was the most important assumption of his plan, the High Seas Fleet would have a real chance to beat the Royal Navy in a big encounter on the high seas, if the cold war between Germany and Britain turned into a hot war one day. As a result, any new ship built by Britain itself or its dominions would again tilt the balance to Germany’s disadvantage.

Accordingly, Tirpitz and the Imperial Navy Office as well as Germany’s naval enthusiasts were angered by the news of Borden’s intentions. In December 1912, the British naval attaché reported after a conversation with a leading member of the German Navy League: “The Canadian movement is not due to wholeheartedness on the part of Canada itself, but to the persistent work of ‘London imperialism’, and particularly to the British Admiralty’s propaganda.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Kaiser even described Borden’s offer and its acceptance by the Admiralty as “an act of bad faith”, for after he had agreed with Lord Haldane in February 1912 “as to the number of ships to be built by both countries and that after such an agreement it was ‘not cricket […] for us to build 9 ships to Germany’s 3’.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Accordingly, German naval planners felt greatly relieved when Borden proved unable to win a majority for his proposal in the Canadian Senate in 1913.

III

The outbreak of World War I in August 1914, however, changed the situation completely.[[8]](#footnote-8) For Germany, Britain was its most dangerous enemy, as Tirpitz had claimed as early as 1897. In spite of this fact and in spite of the many years in which it had prepared for a naval war against this enemy, the German navy had no convincing recipe at hand to successfully fight the Grand Fleet. On the eve of war another one of Tirpitz’s most important assumptions had proved wrong: Instead of imposing a close blockade of the German North Sea coast and thus offering the German fleet greater chances of fighting the Royal Navy under favourable circumstances, British naval manoeuvres had increasingly made clear that Britain would only impose a distant blockade. Due to the disadvantages of geography the High Seas Fleet had no chance of breaking such a blockade without risking total disaster. All it could do was to hope that smaller British forces would nevertheless enter the North Sea and thus offer opportunities to whittle down British naval strength in battles in which the High Seas Fleet would either be superior in numbers or in a better strategic positions. The only other option was to attack the Grand Fleet with submarines and to infest the North Sea with mines.

This “*guerilla war*” or, as the Germans called it, this “*Kleinkriegs*-strategy” was not the strategy Tirpitz had developed in the decades before and for which the vessels of the Imperial German Navy had been built for. In the event, apart form the Battle of Jutland, which more or less only happened by accident, the decisive naval encounter between the two largest fleets of the world never took place.

The success of *U 9*, one of Germany’s first submarines, however, encouraged German naval planners to slowly embark upon a different strategy. Instead of gaining supremacy at sea by fighting the big ships of the Grand Fleet, the Admiralty Staff reverted to a sea-denial strategy. As a result, in February 1915, the waters around Great Britain were declared a war-zone in which German submarines attacked and sank British merchant ships without warning. The sinking of the British passenger liner “*Lusitania”* in May and the death of 115 US-citizens, however, forced the German government to abandon this strategy in order to avoid the entry of the United States into the war on the side of the Entente at least for the time being. In the next two years in spite of heavy infighting, the Imperial German Navy only waged submarine-war according to prize orders, though increasingly with gnashing teeth. The stalemate on the Western front as well as the increasing effectiveness of he blockade forced Germany’s political and military leadership to look for alternatives in order to avoid starvation and military defeat. In the end, they agreed upon waging a new submarine campaign in 1917, even if this meant a serious conflict with the United Sates. The Admiral Staff had promised that German submarines would be able to force Britain onto its knees within six months and that US-support for the allies, however great it was, would not seriously matter, for the war would be over before it would become effective.

It is against this background that Canada comes back into the game again. Though there had been no encounters between German and Canadian vessels before, for the RCN’s ships had either been on patrol in the Pacific or, when deployed to Halifax, proven unfit for service in the Atlantic, Canada was of great importance for Britain’s survival as far as food was concerned. That was where Germany wanted to hit. In 1915/1916 German naval planners had begun to monitor trade routes and supply lines more closely than ever before. Britain’s dependence upon the safe import of grain and other foodstuff from overseas – and this meant from the US and Canada - was regarded as the Achilles’ heel of perfidious Albion. If German submarines could sink more merchant ships than the Allies could build and if Germany could thus cut Britain’s lifelines, victory seemed close at hand. Whether the statistics the Admiral Staff relied upon were realistic is more than doubtful. Of course, enthusiasm was great in the early months of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917. In the first months of the year 1917, German submarines were indeed very successful. In February 1917 almost 500.000 tons of allied shipping went down to the bottom of the sea, in March 548.000 tons and in April 841.000 tons. These figures, it seemed, obviously proved that the Admiral Staff had been right in its daring estimate to force Britain onto its knees. However, as often happens in wartime, it had underestimated the effectiveness of countermeasures. From May 1917 onwards, Britain introduced the convoy system, which soon helped to lower losses at an alarming rate while increasing the toll the U-boats had to pay.

Against this background, it would only have been “natural”, if Germany had declared the US and Canadian coast a war-zone as well. In 1916, German U-cruisers, as they were called, had proven that they were technically capable of crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Astonishingly enough, the German leadership hesitated to take this step. In July 1917, Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg, the Chief of the General Staff, decided against such an escalation of the submarine war, until a “continuous” campaign could be mounted. Single actions would only drive more neutrals into the arms of the Allies. From a political point of view this was an understandable and wise decision.

A year later, in 1918, the present, not to speak of the future, looked more grimly than ever before in the before. As a result, Germany’s military and naval leaderships now changed their minds in this respect: “The military necessity of scattering as much as possible the anti-submarine warfare of our enemies makes it necessary to increase the area of the blockaded zones. … The best chance of success lies in an increase of the unrestricted submarine warfare to the east coast of the Untied States of America.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In the event this never happened. Even though a total of seven German submarines turned up on the US and Canadian East Coast and sank a small number of vessels totaling 110.000 tons, the American East coast became no war-zone during World War I. Surprisingly, it was the Kaiser who prevented this step. In a face-to-face conversation with the military leadership in July 1918, he remained firm and abruptly ended the discussion: “I am of different opinion and it will remain with that”, he argued.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus he strengthened the position of the Chancellor who did not want to disturb US-efforts to negotiate a compromise peace. One should, however, not forget, that the commander-in-chief of the German High Seas Fleet, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, also did not support submarine attacks on the American East Coast. In his eyes, such a strategy would only be a useless diversion of forces he urgently needed in home waters. Instead, he argued, success would be much greater, if the submarines concentrated around the British Isles. There they could stay much longer in the areas of operation than in distant waters where the impact of attacks would be minimal anyway.

These discussions of German submarine strategy soon proved futile, for after the sea-denial strategy had failed by late 1917, the idea to overrun the Allied fronts on land in spring 1918 proved futile as well. As a result, in October 1918, Germany had to ask for peace and sign the Armistice.

IV

A generation later, in 1939, history seemed to repeat itself.[[11]](#footnote-11) Once again, Germany tried to grasp for world power, though under completely different conditions and with completely different aims in mind. Again, as before, the concept of sea power regarded as an important prerequisite to establish world power, was to play an important part in the forthcoming struggle. Unlike 1914, the navy, the *Kriegsmarine* as it was called, was much smaller. Its mindset and its basic ideas were still very similar to those of their forefathers. Again, a powerful fleet, built according to the *Z-Plan* comprising several battleships, aircraft carriers, and cruisers, was to be the material basis of this plan in the inevitable war against the Western powers.

However, the *Kriegsmarine* had learnt some of lessons from the behaviour and the experiences of its predecessor in 1914. Unlike 1914, there could be no doubt that the *Kriegsmarine* would have no chance of success against the Royal Navy. Its size was simply too small. Nevertheless, with the events of the last war and its shameful end for the navy in mind, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder demanded from his men that they would show that the *Kriegsmarine* was able and willing to die gallantly. However, this did not mean that he was pleading for suicide missions. Although Raeder was in many ways a true disciple of Tirpitz, in his study of the naval war he had realized that commerce warfare might indeed be an alternative strategy to Tirpitz’s ideas.[[12]](#footnote-12) By destroying Britain’s trade the *Kriegsmarine* might indeed inflict heavy losses upon the enemy. Moreover, it might also force her to spread her forces, which might otherwise be deployed against Germany in a more direct way. Eventually, this kind of warfare, if waged right from the beginning and not too late as in World War I, was supposed to break Britain’s will to continue the war and, moreover, to help keep the United States out of the war.

As a result German pocket battleships and submarines were supposed to wage commerce warfare against British trade routes right from the beginning of the war. As early as 1935 the *Kriegsmarine* had begun to monitor Britain’s trade for this purpose.[[13]](#footnote-13) Among these routes those to Canada played an important role, for, according to German estimates, the safe transport of food as well as soldiers from Canada would play an important part in Britain’s defence strategy.

Accordingly, on the eve of war, German pocket battleships and submarines took up their war-stations in the Atlantic Ocean in order to begin a tonnage-war, as it was called, against Britain. Unlike 1914, there was no debate about the guiding principles of this kind of warfare neither within the Kriegsmarine itself nor between the navy and Germany’s political leadership. However, in order to keep the United States out of the war, submarine attacks were restricted to the waters around the British Isles. Further in the West, the risk of sinking US-vessels seemed too great for the time being.

In the end, this was only a temporary measure. Though the attacks of German surface ships had threatened allied supply lines to some extent in late 1939 and in 1940, forcing the Allies to protect their convoys with heavy ships as well, the sinking of the *Bismarck* and the disappearance of the remaining German battle-cruisers and pocket-battleships from the oceans meant that the submarine became the ultimate weapon of the *Kriegsmarine* from mid-1941 onwards.

Roughly, this tonnage war can be divided into eight phases:[[14]](#footnote-14) the first lasting from September 1939 until March 1940; the second lasting from June 1940 until spring 1941, both concentrating upon British supply-lines around the British Isles; the third lasting from April 1941 until January 1942, now attacking allied convoys in the Western part of the Atlantic; the fourth lasting from January until July 1942, directed against allied transports off the American Coast; the fifth and most decisive phase lasting from August 1942 until May1943 concentrating upon allied convoys in the North Atlantic; the sixth lasting only from June until August 1943, trying to shift the focus of German attacks to the Central Atlantic; the seventh lasting from September 1943 until May 1944, trying to renew attacks on Allied convoys in the Atlantic; and the eighth lasting from June 1944 until May 1945 during which German submarines again withdrew from the Atlantic in order to renew their attacks upon Allied convoys in European waters.

During this tonnage war German submarines, fighting according to tactical principles which differed fundamentally from their predecessors, increasingly fought convoy battles with Canadian vessels which protected Allied merchant vessels transporting important goods for the Allied war-effort either to Britain or, later on in the war, to Russia.

In spite of the remarkable number of Allied ships, which the submarines sank especially in 1942/early 1943, they eventually lost the tonnage war. Whereas German submarines had been able to sink more than 600000 tons of Allied shipping in June 1942, this number constantly decreased until the end of the war, while, at the same time, the number of U-Boat-losses steadily increased. Looking at this in greater detail, whereas only 82 submarines were lost until July 1942 in a tonnage war, which cost the Allies 8018244 tons of shipping, the price for sinking another 5343450 tons in the remaining years of the war was incredibly high: 485 submarines went down in the North Atlantic until the end of the war.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The reasons for this debacle are simple: The Allies, and this includes the Canadian Navy which underwent a considerable process of building up its strength, not only constantly improved their anti-submarine capabilities, but they also successfully broke into Germany’s naval cipher code. Thus they were able to redirect convoys as well as to detect the concentration of the *wolf packs* at a very early stage. Moreover, they were able to build more merchant vessels than the submarines, which suffered increasing losses, could sink. In the end, in May 1943 the Battle of the Atlantic was definitely lost in spite of several attempts to renew it in 1944/early 1945 by again sending small numbers of submarines to the American East Coast.[[16]](#footnote-16) The sinking of a small number of merchant and warships off Halifax were insignificant in the end. Those submarines which had still been on patrol in the Atlantic eventually surrendered to the Allied navies including the Canadian Navy in May 1945.

V

It was only ten years after the end of World War II that relations between the German and Allied navies including the Canadian Navy got on a completely, namely friendly footing. As Michael Salewski has rightly claimed, only after the total disaster of 1945 Germany began to understand the sea by realizing that democracy and sea power were historically interrelated.[[17]](#footnote-17) Moreover, the concept of sea power differed fundamentally from that of its numerous predecessors.[[18]](#footnote-18) First, and most important, sea power was not regarded as a means in itself, supposed to realize national aims in a struggle for world power. Instead, it was regarded as a means of defence against a possible attack. Second, in order to defend what had been achieved after total disaster – democracy, social and economic stability – the Germans were only too willing to become members of an alliance. Since 1956, when Germany, now for the sixth time within a hundred years, began to build up a new navy right from the start, its new navy, the *Bundesmarine*, as it was first called, and now the Germany Navy, as it is called since reunification, has been a partner of the Western Allies of NATO with its frigates and destroyers, its fast patrol boats and its submarines.

Though the defence of the Baltic approaches was one of the main tasks of the Bundesmarine during the Cold War, German and Canadian vessels have worked together very closely as members of the Allied Standing Naval Force North Atlantic in order to protect Allied supply lines against a common enemy, the Soviet Union in the case of a hot war. This partnership has been extended to common missions after the end of the Cold War in the Adriatic or off the Somali Coast.

This cooperation is the foundation of future cooperation, though there are two important caveats. First, due to history the German public is still very reluctant to send German forces overseas, unless these have either a clearly humanitarian character or pursue aims on which the majority can agree. The decision to support *Operation Enduring Freedom*, but to refuse to invade Iraq is probably the best example. Of course, this looks like dancing on a tightrope, but it reflects a deep-rooted sentiment, which cannot be ignored. Second, the end of the cold war as well as the policy of the United States towards Iraq have strengthened those who demand a stronger and more independent European role also in defence matters as well as in the planning and in the conduct of peace missions. The European mission to the Congo, whether one regards this as successful or not does not matter, is one example of this change of policy.

In the course of this fundamental change the character of the German Navy also changed.[[19]](#footnote-19) Whereas it had been a typical Cold War navy in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and even in the 1990s, it slowly turned into a navy capable of either projecting power or defending German interests in all kinds of foreign missions. The new type 125 frigate and the corvettes of the *Braunschweig*-class, which have become operational in past months reflect this change in the navy’s building policy as well as its strategy. However, capabilities and new strategies are one thing, political consensus to make use of them is another and much more critical matter. The debate about the deployment of ships or troops leave no doubt that history still weighs heavily upon German defense policy in general and Germany’s concept of sea power in particular.

1. For an excellent survey of this period in german history cf. Holger H. Herwig, ‚*Luxury’ Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980); cf. also Michael Epkenhans, “Imperial Germany and the Importance of Sea Power”, in: *Naval Power in the Twentieth Ce*n­tury. Ed by Nicholas A. M. Rodger, (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 27-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Michael Epkenhans, *Tirpitz. Architect of the German Battlefleet*, (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. the report of the report of 18 August 1908 which includes a number of photographs and charts, in Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv RM 5/5715 as well as the report of the Light cruiser “*Bremen*”, 28 May 1912, in Ibid., RM 5/5714 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. the report of the Armoured cruiser “*Victoria Luise*”, 9 October 1912, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv RM 5/5714. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For details cf. Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Vol. 1: The road to War, 1904-1914*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 298, 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Captain Watson to Admiralty, 11 December 1912, cited in: *Naval Intelligence from Germany. The Reports of the British Naval Attachés in Berlin, 1906-1914*. Ed. by Matthew S. Seligmann, (London: **Navy Records Society Publications,** 2007), p. 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Captain Watson to Sir Edward Goschen, 30 June 1913, cited Ibid., p. 501. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On the naval war during World War I cf. Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, (London: University College Press, 1994), pp. 21-50, 287-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Holtzendorff to Kühlmann, 3 March 1918, cited in: Holger Herwig/David Trusk, “The Failure of Imperial Germany’s Undersea Offensive Against World Shipping”, February 1917-October 1918, in: *The Historian*, 34 (1970), p. 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Protocol of a meeting on 2 July 1918, cited Ibid., p. 627. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the best survey of German naval policy before an during World War II cf. Werner Rahn, “German Naval Power in the first and Second World War”, in: *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. by Nicholas A.M. Rodger, (London: Naval Inst Pr, 1996), p. 88-100, and by the same author: Der Seekrieg im Atlantik und Nordmeer, in: Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg. Ed. by *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*, (München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1990), vol. 6, pp. 275-425, and: Die deutsche Seekriegführung 1943 bis 1945, in: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*. Ed. by Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, (München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2008), vol. 10/1, pp. 3-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On Raeder’s strategic ideas cf. Kenneth P. Hansen, Raeder versus Wegener. *Conflict in German Naval Strategy*, Naval War College Review vol. 34, 2005, pp. 84-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. the „Unterlagen für Handelskrieg“, 1938, in: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv RM 7/2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Rahn, Seekriegführung, in: *Das Deutsche Reich*, pp. 95-169; cf. ibid. also the detailed maps on pp. 149-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Michael Hadley, „U-Boote vor Halifax im Winter 1944/45, in: *Marinerundschau* vol. 79 (1982), pp. 138-144, 202-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. Michael Salewski, „Deutschland als Seemacht“, in: Guntram Schulze Wegener, *Deutschland zur See*. 150 Jahre Marinegeschichte, (Hamburg: Mittler, 1998), pp. 277-288. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Guntram Schulze Wegener, *Deutschland zur See*. 150 Jahre Marinegeschichte, (Hamburg: Mittler, 1998), pp. 214-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. the contributions of the German naval leadership in: “Basis See. Das Zukunftkonzept der Deutschen Marine“, in: *Maritime Convention* 1/2008, pp. 3-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)