



Christian Rödel. *Krieger, Denker, Amateure: Alfred von Tirpitz und das Seekriegsbild vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 234 S. Euro 48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-08360-7.



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Prepared for Jutland?

The naval arms race prior to the Great War 1914-1918 and especially the rise of the German High Seas Fleet have been controversial objects of research in and outside Germany since the debate about the question of German responsibility for the outbreak of the war in the 1920s. So far, the main studies have concentrated on the political intentions behind the building of a large German navy in the Tirpitz era. The results reach from interpretations of the High Seas Fleet as an instrument for the German “bid for mastery” (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*) to the concentration on motifs of interior policy against the parliament and the growing worker’s movement. Curiously, apart from extensive research about the building of the fleet, the navy itself has been largely omitted from examination. There are only few studies about the German navy prior to 1914 and we still lack a serious biography of its architect, Alfred von Tirpitz.

In his study, Christian Rödel examines the strategic thinking of Tirpitz and the images that existed about the development of naval power in the two decades around 1900. This field has not received much attention either, as Edward Wegener remarked as early as 1972. In his introduction, Rödel takes a short look at the history of naval planning in Prussia and Germany and argues that

German fleets were never directed at present needs but aimed at meeting the imagined needs of the future—even through the 1930s. For Tirpitz’s strategic thinking, several factors played an important role: the nineteenth century produced a series of theories about naval power and war at sea, mostly based on historical experiences. In addition, these questions became much more relevant for Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, as German seaborne trade grew considerably and with the German colonies in Africa and the Pacific. This expansion brought German interests in opposition to those of other powers, mainly England—an assessment of the situation not unique to German eyes. It seemed clear, that Germany would have to defend its interests with a strong navy, which had two basic tasks: the defense of the German coast and the protection of interests and citizens abroad (p. 32). As Rödel puts it, German sea power was seen as a political imperative.

In the thinking of the time, the navy had to grow according to the growth of trade and interests—but the constant claim also made by Tirpitz, that the German navy was only built with regard to the needs of Germany, has been revealed as a political argument. In reality, the required number of ships was always measured

in comparison with the Royal Navy. Although war plans against England had never been developed in the nineteenth century, if Germany wanted to reach a position of equity with the old sea powers, England's position was the greatest obstacle (p. 45). One of the basic ideas connected with building of a bigger fleet was thus to use it to put political pressure upon England to secure Germany's position and eventually to force England to accept Germany as a partner on equal terms. The basis for achieving this goal was the "risk"-concept: the German navy had to be big enough to endanger England and cause the possibility of English loss of naval superiority in case of a war against Germany, thus making war at sea too risky for the Royal Navy.

But even if most of the decision-makers in imperial Germany agreed that this expressed *Weltpolitik* needed a bigger fleet, which ships were to be built? This question was not easy to answer in the 1890s. Only after 1900 were new types of battleships developed and only then did the order of battle become clearer, a state of affairs heightened by practical lessons from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Tirpitz aimed at a "homogeneous battle fleet." In contrast to earlier concepts of cruiser warfare, Tirpitz's strategic thinking started in home waters, the North Sea was to be the "lever of our world policy." German battleships were consequently built for short operations, carrying only a limited amount of coal and without much comfort for crews. Tirpitz never ignored the need for German cruisers abroad, but a cruiser fleet was for him a project for a distant future. In the present, Germany had to become a naval power and in his mind, the only way to reach this goal was to build battleships. Until the battlefleet was ready to play its role, every deviation from this course would only endanger the whole project.

German naval policy in the Tirpitz era is usually examined today from the hindsight perspective of developments in the First World War, when the German concept came to naught, as it had been based on the assumption that the British fleet would prefer a close blockade of the German shore. German battleships had not been built for the blockade that actually occurred and the only major naval clash of arms, the battle of Jutland, was a complete strategic defeat. Roedel argues that of course it is only reasonable to assume that Tirpitz had not planned to build a navy bound to loosely. It seems that Tirpitz never thought of the worst case scenario Germany faced in 1914, as he had always contemplated confronting Great Britain at least with one considerable ally. It is a paradox that the building of the fleet according to the risk theory on the political scene helped to create

just the coalition Tirpitz never intended to fight (p. 113). Roedel gives a good overview of the different ways in which Tirpitz's fleet was to function and discusses thoroughly the various aspects of the risk theory. Although it was not Roedel's intention, it would have been interesting to examine critically which strategic flaws and errors ultimately led to the situation in 1914 that Germany had built an expensive navy, which was almost useless in Germany's war efforts except in the protection of the coast—depriving the army of valuable resources.

In the second part, Roedel puts Tirpitz's ideas in the context of three leading naval theorists of the late-nineteenth century: Julian Stafford Corbett, Alfred Stenzel and Alfred Thayer Mahan. He gives a good summary of their ideas, but at least in the case of Corbett fails to make convincingly clear how Tirpitz was actually influenced by his theories. The chapter about the inner-German opposition against Tirpitz is surely the weakest of this work. Although a few names are mentioned, Roedel pays attention only to the concepts of Curt Freiherr von Maltzahn, and does not discuss them further. A harsh opponent like Lothar Persius is not even mentioned here, although one of his major works against Tirpitz appears in the bibliography. In his conclusion, Roedel comes to the opinion, that Tirpitz was more oriented toward tradition than normally assumed. His ideas about the battle fleet corresponded with the official picture of naval battles in his time. But Tirpitz created an anachronism—a fleet influencing the present in just such a way that the future it was built for would never come (p. 213).

The work is directed at historians specializing in the pre-history of World War I. It is well researched and makes good use of the existing literature, although some recent works have not been included. Roedel has done a remarkable job, as this is his master thesis. One might only wonder why he did not write a much shorter work which would have served as well for his examinations and then use thorough archival research to expand it into an excellent dissertation. It is too late for this project now, as an important work by Rolf Hobson was published six months earlier (and is not mentioned in Roedel's study): *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914*. Hobson deals with almost the same topic as Roedel, but on a much broader basis. Roedel did not use any unpublished archival sources; Hobson's book, in contrast, makes extensive use of the German Imperial Navy's rich material in the Military Archive in Freiburg.

If Roedel and his editors had noticed Hobson's publication, it would have been clear that they were about to print a book already partially obsolete at its publication. One reason for this failure might be the lack of a working discourse about naval history in Germany. German historians proficient in naval history are scarce and even the Arbeitskreis Militaergeschichte, which has done quite remarkable work to promote the study of military history

in the last years, has so far largely ignored naval matters. If there had been a forum where works in progress were presented and where scholars would update each other about current projects (or an existing possibility like the newsletter of the Arbeitskreis Militaergeschichte had been used), this kind of unhappy coincidence could have been avoided.

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